



The Rev. George H. Morrison, D. D.

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BX 9178 .M6 F6 1920
Morrison, George H. 1866-
1928.
The footsteps of the flock

THE FOOTSTEPS OF THE FLOCK

' Tell me, O thou whom my soul loveth, where thou feedest, where thou makest thy flock to rest at noon : for why should I be as one that turneth aside by the flocks of thy companions ?

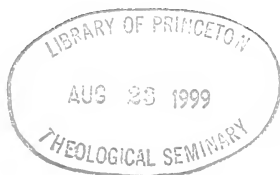
' If thou know not, O thou fairest among women, go thy way forth by the footsteps of the flock, and feed thy kids beside the shepherds' tents.'

The Footsteps of the Flock

SCRIPTURE STUDIES FOR EVERY
SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

BY THE REV.

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HODDER AND STOUGHTON
NEW YORK AND LONDON

The following studies have all appeared in the Scottish edition of the British Weekly. They were primarily intended for the use of Sabbath School teachers; but I have found that they were being widely read in our Scottish homes, and indeed far beyond the bounds of Scotland. I have therefore been led (after much hesitancy) to bring them together in this form, in the hope that the book may win for itself a place among those volumes which consecrate the quiet hours of the Sabbath. I have to thank a very gifted friend (whose friendship has been precious to me) for aid in the selection of the studies.

G. H. M.

*Wellington Church
Glasgow, 1904.*

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FIRST SUNDAY

Morning

THE STORY OF THE CREATION

Passages to be read : Gen. i. 1-28 ; ii. 1-3.

WHEN we compare this story of creation with the text-books that are now read in schools and colleges, we feel as if we had passed from some beautiful scene in nature, into some factory with all the engines going. At first, in making such a change as that, it is the mighty differences that impress us. Between the factory, with all its noise of wheels, and the silence and wonder of hillside and of loch, there seems to lie a gulf that is impassable ; but gradually we come to apprehend that the energy which keeps every loom a-going is the very power that makes the hillsides green, and gives the light and shadow to the loch. So is it with this story of creation, and all the secrets which science has unlocked. At first we are startled by the tremendous differences, then we perceive an underlying kinship. Great truths are hidden in this simple story which all the learning of ages has not antiquated ; and though they are put here in a pictorial way (for even God must speak as a child to children), they are none the less true to the discerning heart. Do you think, now, if the writer had written of evolution, and of the silent passing of unnumbered millions of years—do you think that his audience would ever have listened to him ? They would have laughed him away as a ridiculous dreamer, and refused to believe his messages from God. So God withheld that knowledge

from His servant—it would all be given when the time was ripe for it. He bade him take the conceptions men could grasp then. He bade him speak in words they could understand. And He inspired His writer so to use these stories, and so to purify them and fill them full of light, that they became the avenues of priceless teaching. What, then, were some of the lessons God was teaching when He illuminated the heart of this historian? They were many; but we shall notice only three.

THE first is *that God is the Creator*—in the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. At the back of all existence is the Almighty, and by His word everything was made. If you had asked a Greek what he thought about the universe, he might have told you that matter was eternal. If you had asked a Roman, he might have tried to explain things by the chance clashings of unnumbered atoms. But here, when Greek philosophy was yet unborn, we have the magnificent chant, ‘In the beginning, God’; and that is sublime, because it is so simple, and it is simple because it is inspired. Of course to us to-day that truth is almost commonplace. We have been familiar with it since our childhood. And therefore, perhaps, it does not cheer and aid us as God unquestionably meant that it should do. But if readers of the Bible will keep an open eye for the word (or thought) ‘Creator,’ they will find how men were ennobled, once, by this first trumpet-note, ‘In the beginning—God.’ Why was Jacob so blessed above other peoples? Because the portion of Jacob is the former of all things (Jer. x. 16). Unto whom are we to commit the keeping of our souls in well-doing? Unto God as unto a faithful Creator (1 Pet. iv. 19). Whom are we to remember in the morning of life? Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth (Eccles. xii. 1). And how may we know that God will not overlook us? Because He is the Creator of the ends of the earth, who fainteth not, neither is weary (Isa. xl. 28). When we

get a present from somebody who loves us, it is doubly precious if the giver made it. It is invested with a heightened value when we know that the giver wrought it all himself. So God has given us this wonderful universe, with its sun and moon, and hills and lochs and flowers, and the joy of it is increased a thousandfold, when we learn that He who gave it made it all.

THE second is *that God wrought in gradual ways.* When we study the methods of our Lord Jesus Christ, we see how gradually He communicated truth. He loved to work in a slow and steady way, leading His disciples forward step by step. I have yet many things to teach you, He said to them once, but ye cannot bear them now. Where, think you, did the divine Son acquire that method? Were not His activities moulded upon His Father's ways? In the slow and gradual method of Redemption is the parallel and crown to the Creation. I wonder if the writer of Genesis was never tempted to make all creation the work of a single instant. Would it not have been a thought of infinite grandeur to have pictured the whole as accomplished in a flash? If he had done that, he would have shut his heart to the voice divine that was inspiring him, and men to-day would have been smiling at the crude fancies of an oriental dreamer. But *here*, there is nothing sudden and appalling; there is sure and steady progress onward and upward; and all the discoveries of all the sciences are helping to explain and to confirm that truth. We need not try to make the 'days' symbolical. When the writer says a day he means a day. God did not break the cup His child held up to Him; He cleansed it and filled it with the living water. The wonder is that in this artless narrative, and under these figures of the early world, there should be found that truth of God's procedure which to-day is dominating the thought of men.

THE third is *that man is God's masterpiece*—'the diapason closes full in man.' At the festival of creation, as at the feast of Cana, the best wine was kept unto the last. And how was man the greatest of God's works? Was it because there were giants in those days? Not so; but because on man alone there was the impress of the Creator's nature. He only was created in God's image; he only could have fellowship with God; he only could enter into the thoughts of God, and share the purposes of his great artificer. And if all the centuries that have passed since then have but helped to illumine man's dignity and glory, if this great doctrine of man's worth to God has been sealed by the gift of Jesus Christ, how reverently we should adore the wisdom which set that truth on the first page of Scripture.

FIRST SUNDAY

Evening

THE WISE MEN AND THE STAR

Passage to be read: Matt. ii. 1-23.

ONE of the first lessons of this passage is *that God speaks to men in ways they can understand*. These Chaldeans had been star-gazers from childhood; the study of the nightly heavens was their passion. They had watched the stars with a patience and an accuracy such as are never suffered to go unrewarded. And *now* by the aid of the stars they loved so well, and on which they had meditated with such unwearied devotion, they are brought to the feet of the infant in the manger. The *shepherds* were not Chaldeans, they were Jews. They had been trained in the doctrines of the angels. I dare say they never went out to the pasture

of a night without hoping to see some shimmer of angel-wings. So it was by the long-expected voice of angels that the shepherds received the tidings of the Christ. But the Chaldeans had not learned the lore of angels; it was the lore of stars they were familiar with; God spake to the separate companies in separate voices, but the voices were those that each could understand. Let us never forget that that is always true. His voice is as the sound of *many* waters. He is a Father, and you never heard of a father who took his children on his knee and answered their questions in Latin or in Greek. We shall never understand the Bible truly, nor shall we ever value aright all that we learned in childhood, until we have grasped this simple yet profound truth, that God speaks to men in ways they can understand.

ANOTHER lesson of this passage is *by what unlikely ways men may be led to Jesus*. We know that the prophets pointed on to Jesus; so did the law—Christ was the end of the law. So did the sacrifices on the Jewish altars, and the stern summons to repentance of the Baptist. All these things were intended and adapted to guide men into the presence of Messiah, and multitudes journeyed to His presence so. But a star—do you think that was a likely leader? Is that the duty and the function of a star? Yet by a star, as surely as by the angels, were men conducted to the Bethlehem manger. Let us be taught, then, that by unlooked-for ways men may be led to light and love and liberty. Let us never limit the power of the Almighty in opening up avenues to Jesus' feet. There are men who have heard unmoved a thousand sermons, and been deaf to the whole range of evangelical appeal, who have yet been won for Christ by a stray word in passing, or by some act of self-sacrificing kindness. There are women whom all the praise of the sanctuary has not moved, but who have been turned to

God by the ceasing of childish laughter. The star is a type of the strange and unlooked-for ways in which men are led to the feet of Jesus Christ.

A THIRD lesson of this passage is *the intense curiosity of these men about the King*. Nothing would satisfy them but that they must leave home and kindred, and set out on a long and toilsome journey, and brave a hundred dangers on the road, all for the sake of seeing and worshipping Christ. Had it been a king of the whole East who had been promised them, I could have better understood their curiosity. For there is a strong desire in the heart of a loyal subject to get a glimpse of his own future sovereign. But it was not a king of Chaldea they were seeking—‘Where is He that is called King of the Jews?’ And when I think of that passionate inquiry for the unknown monarch of an alien race, and how they travelled hundreds of miles to see Him—o’er moor and fen, o’er crag and torrent—and how they troubled Jerusalem about Him, and would not be baffled nor beaten in the search, I am amazed at the mysterious interest excited by the new-born Saviour. The strange thing is that from that hour to this, that curiosity has never died away. The fact remains that in the whole of history Jesus is the supremely fascinating figure. More thoughts are directed to Jesus in one day than to Cæsar or Napoleon in ten years. More books are written about Jesus now than about any hundred of earth’s greatest men. There is an inexplicable mystery and charm about that simple Galilean figure; and the world is still as curious about Him as were the wise men when they saw His star.

AGAIN, *the most anxious inquirers about Jesus were men who were very far away from Him*. I wish you to compare these pilgrims from the East with the men who

were gathered in the inn at Bethlehem. The Chaldeans were many a long mile away, and the company in the inn were at the manger. Yet it was not the latter band, it was the former, who were eager and anxious about the new-born Saviour.

‘There were ninety-and-nine that safely lay
In the shelter of the fold,
But *some* were out on the hills away,
Far off from the gates of gold.
Away on the mountains wild and bare,
Away from the tender shepherd’s care’—

yet who were the nearest to Jesus Christ that night—was it not those who were so far away? That is a parable of what often happens. At home, in the bosom of a Christian country, we are always in danger of careless unconcern. We are exposed to that worst indifference that springs from the dying of the sense of wonder. Meantime, from distant countries like Chaldea, come tidings of the kingdom being taken by violence. Once again the most anxious seekers are men whom we should say were far away.

LASTLY, let us not fail to observe *the apparent insignificance of what they found*. When the Queen of Sheba set out from Arabia, and entered with her fine retinue into Jerusalem, she saw such lavish glory there that her heart sank under the wonder of it. But when the wise men from the East came to the inn, expecting perhaps some sight of royal majesty, they found in happy innocence—a child. I wonder if they felt a touch of disappointment? Was it worth while to make that tedious journey, and this—this little babe—the end of it? We know now that it was well worth while; that infant of days was the eternal Lord. So there come times to every one of us when we are tempted to ask, ‘Is all our effort worth while?’ We pray and serve and struggle through

the darkness, and the end of it all seems (as it were) a manger. But for us, too, the eternal dawn is coming when the King in His beauty shall meet us with a welcome; and I think we shall find then, like the wise men from the East, that the journey to Bethlehem was well worth while.

SECOND SUNDAY

Morning

THE FALL

Passage to be read : Gen. iii. 1-24.

IT is notable that the first happiness of the human race, and the saddest tragedies of human history, are for ever associated with gardens. It was in a garden that God placed man whom He had formed, and out of the ground the Lord God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food. It was in a garden that Jesus agonised on that night on which He was betrayed, for we read, 'He went forth with His disciples over the brook Cedron, where was a garden into which He entered.' And then a few days later when the end has come, and when the cruel sufferings of the cross are over, we pass into the quiet beauty of another garden. 'In the place where He was crucified there was a garden, and in the garden a new sepulchre, wherein was never man yet laid. There laid they Jesus.' What a contrast between these gardens of the Bible! Fresh from the hand of God, radiant in the endowment of new life, man had been placed in the first. Fresh from the torture of the cross, and bound in the wrappings of the tomb, the Son of Man had been placed in the last. That sin which had entered the world amid the joy of Eden had done its worst, and the Lord whom it slew was laid among the flowers. So does the sphere where the brightest happiness is known, often become the scene of deepest sorrow. Where man has tasted what is sweetest, *there* may he

have to drink of what is bitterest. It was not in any wilderness that Christ was laid ; it was in a garden that the grave was opened ; and in a garden, long centuries before, man had walked in happy innocence with God.

NOW the first great lesson in this story of the fall is *that moral trial is necessary for man*. It was not Adam, nor was it any evil power, who planted these fateful trees in the garden's midst. The hand which planted them there was that of God. Do we not think sometimes that it would have been kinder if God had never set that tree in Eden? Would it not have been a paradise indeed, but for that fruitful temptation in the heart of it? The point to remember is that if man is to develop into the fulness of his God-given powers, there must always be the opportunity of choice. There is something greater than that childish innocence that has never known of a tree of good and evil. There is the moral grandeur that springs from human freedom ; there is the power to choose the narrow way of God. And when I read of this garden of delight, and of the one restriction in the heart of it, I feel how clearly the writer was illumined to see the primary need of moral trial. You will never know how strong the lighthouse is, till it has stood the buffet of the storm. You will never be certain that the bridge is stable, till it has borne the weight of heavy loads. You will never fathom the dignity of man, till you have seen him tried and tested by alternatives. That, then, is the first lesson of this chapter. The tree of the knowledge of good and evil speaks of that.

ANOTHER lesson which we should learn is this, that *we are always ready to lay the blame on others*. God had told Adam, in plain words, that he must not eat of this tree in the midst of the garden (ii. 17). The way of life, and the sad way of death, had been explicitly announced to him. It is amazing how swiftly Adam disobeyed. There is no echo of a long and bitter

conflict. We only read, 'Eve gave also unto her husband with her, and he did eat.' Then came the opening of the eyes, and the fear, and the sense of shame, and the stern inquiry of the great Creator—and immediately the human brain is busy in fashioning excuses for its guilt. 'The woman whom *Thou* gavest me gave me of the tree'—as if the blame were partly God's, and partly Eve's. 'The serpent beguiled me and I did eat'—as if all the blame could be fastened on the serpent. So does the writer touch upon that strange infirmity that is written large on the story of mankind. Are we not often tempted, when we have been tried and have fallen, to shift the burden of the blame to others? Are we not very skilful in devising excuses for ourselves, that we never think of offering for other people? The Bible warns us that from the first hour of sin this has been one of the arts of human nature, and it tells us plainly that the art is vain. The gods of the Greeks were pleased with subtle pretexts; in the eyes of the God of the Bible they are useless. If Adam has disobeyed, Adam must suffer—the soul that sinneth, *it* shall die. When we are tempted to excuse ourselves, to implicate others, and so think to escape, there is no chapter in the Bible more fitted than this one to bring us to ourselves.

THEN there is a third great lesson here; it is that *one sin may alter everything*. It would be difficult to picture a greater contrast than between the beginning and the ending of our chapter. The gladness of the sunlight has departed, and the heavens are overcast with cloud. Instead of quiet assurance before God, there is the guilty desire to escape Him. Instead of happy possession of the garden, there is banishment into the wide world beyond. All things are changed; it is a different world; it is as if every bird had ceased to sing; and one act of disobedience has done it all. Remember, then, that a single act or deed may change the current

of a man's whole life. One choice, made in a moment, often lightly—and the future will never be the same again. Let a man do one noble deed, and play the hero even for one hour, and the world will be richer to him ever after, and he will have the comradeship of noble souls. But let a man play the coward or the cheat, not twice but once, not openly but secretly, and life will be meaner, and the world a poorer place, until the threescore years and ten are run. There are great joys which meet us in an instant, but the light of them shall shine on till the grave. And there are choices we are called to make which—made in a moment—will determine everything.

LASTLY, *the clothing of our shame must come from God.* When Adam and Eve fell, they clothed themselves with fig leaves ; it was a light covering and very easily made. But God was not contented with that covering ; we read that He made them coats of skins, and clothed them. It was God who provided that covering of shame, and He provided it by the dark way of death. Is there no gleam there of deeper truths ? Is there no prophecy of the evangel ? Read over again that great hymn, 'Rock of Ages,' and let this chapter illustrate its figures.

SECOND SUNDAY

Evening

SIMEON AND ANNA

Passage to be read : Luke ii. 25-39.

NO more beautiful scene could be imagined than this meeting of age and infancy in the Temple. As we read the story of the life of Jesus, we find Him surrounded on all hands by hypocrisy, until we

begin to wonder if there was any religion left in those who haunted these sacred courts. But here, for a moment, the curtain is drawn aside. We get a glimpse of a Jewish man and woman. And we find them living holy and separated lives, and longing for the advent of Messiah. On a gravestone erected over certain soldiers in Virginia there are these words, 'Who they were, no one knows; what they were, every one knows,' and we might use these words of Simeon and Anna. Who Simeon was we shall never learn; Luke is at no pains to tell us that; but what he was in his daily life and walk, in his inmost desire, and in the sight of God, every one knows who has read this gospel chapter. Simeon and Anna, then, entered the Temple when the infant Saviour was there, and to them the glory of the child was shown.

FIRST, then, we learn that *we should never give up hoping*. When Alexander the Great crossed into Asia he gave away almost all his belongings to his friends. One of his captains asked him, 'Sir, what do you keep for yourself?' And the answer of the king was, 'I keep hope.' Now we do not *read* that Simeon was an old man, though it has been universally believed (from verse 29) that he was. But through all his years Simeon was like Alexander: he had parted with much, but he had held fast to hope. The days were very dark days for Israel; no John the Baptist had sounded his trumpet-note; everything seemed hopeless for the Jews, and some of the noblest of them had taken refuge in despair. But this brave soul 'waited for the consolation of Israel,' and we know now that his waiting was not vain. Do you see the roots of that heart-hopefulness of his? It ran down to justice and devotion (v. 25). It would have withered long since if it had not been rooted in an upright life and in fellowship with God. Dishonest conduct and forgetfulness of God are always visited with the withering of hope, for hope hangs like a fruit on the

first two great commandments. Let us all keep hoping, then, as Simeon did; let us be expectant and on the outlook to the end; and let us remember that that glad and helpful temper is only possible when we are just and devout.

NEXT we see that *God's performance is greater than His promise*. There is an old legend that Simeon had stumbled over the words in Isaiah vii. 14. And as he prayed and wrestled with his doubts, it was revealed to him that with his own eyes he would see the virgin's Son. All that he dared to hope for was a glimpse—'a brief glimpse' and 'a passing word' would have sufficed him. He lived in expectation of the hour when some one would say to him, 'Behold Messiah!' *Now* the expected moment has arrived—and is it merely a glimpse of Messiah that he wins?—he takes the child of all his hopes up in his arms (v. 28). No wonder that he broke forth into such glorious praise; he had got more than he could ask or think. God's promise had buoyed him through many a weary day; but the performance was greater than the promise. We should all remember that in entering the New Year, and when we speak about the promise of the year. God has a royal way of doing things, and His cups have a happy art of running over. The devil is a most lavish and tireless promiser, but how the promise is performed let our own past days tell us. God's promises are very many and very great; but to a living and prayerful faith as Simeon's was, the performance is greater than the promise.

AGAIN we remark that *Simeon and Anna saw Jesus in the Temple*. The shepherds had seen Him lying in the manger; there, too, the wise men from the East had seen Him. But it was not in the manger that He was seen by these two devout souls; it was in the House of God. Now there is a sense in which we

all must find Christ in the manger, we must discover Him under life's lowly roofs. In places which were never consecrated, but where the daily drudgery is done, there must we waken to the presence of Jesus. But on the other hand it is equally true, that we shall miss Him if we do not go to church; and we must never enter a place of worship without the prayer, 'Sir, we would see Jesus.' Columba got his Gaelic name, 'Colum of the churches,' says an old Irish Life, because as a boy he was so devoted to church-worship; like Simeon, he saw Jesus in the Temple.

LASTLY, we learn that *till we have seen Jesus we are not ready to die* (vs. 29-32). Children do not dwell much upon death; God did not intend that they should do so. But sometimes, even to children, comes the thought, 'When is a person ready to die?' Well, length of years has little to do with it, although all young people think that it has. We are not ready to die when we are seventy; we are ready when we have seen Christ as our Saviour. Have the children of the family seen Him so? Are the fathers and mothers praying for that end? A little girl dearly loves to hold the baby. Get it from Simeon's arms, and give it her.

THIRD SUNDAY

Morning

CAIN AND ABEL

Passage to be read : Gen. iv. 1-16.

WE should first learn from this sad story *that God had not forsaken man.* The scene that meets us in this chapter is very different from that of the garden. Sin has entered into the world, and the happy innocence of Eden is destroyed. Cain is born, and the word Cain means possession ; Abel is born, and the word Abel means vanity. Was it beginning to dawn thus early on mankind that 'man at his best estate is altogether vanity' ? The curse is beginning to work out to its fulfilment, and men are finding that the wages of sin is death. Yet even now God is not far away. He has not withdrawn Himself from human life. He has not lost hope nor heart in the mysterious being who had so lately been made in His own image. He moves across this field of sin and murder, no less evidently than He did in the garden of Eden. Let us not forget, then, that though this is a tragic chapter, there is a gleam of sunshine through the storm. We begin to find here what we could not find before—the patience and long-suffering of heaven. For we must remember that what we have in Genesis is the first unfolding of God's redeeming purpose. It is not a compendium of universal history ; it is the record of the saving will of God. Already we have had the promise to the woman, 'Thou shalt bruise his heel' ; now we have tokens of a

deep solicitude, and of a great forbearance in the heart on high; and all this is like the pathway through the heather, that shall soon broaden into a highway of the Lord, and lead in the fulness of the time to Calvary, and to a blood that speaketh better things than that of Abel.

WE should next learn *that God values the gift according to the spirit of the giver*. Abel was a keeper of sheep; Cain was a tiller of the ground—he was wresting a blessing from what God had cursed. The discipline of work had now begun, and in the sweat of their face the brothers ate their bread. Then the day came when they began to offer sacrifice; they were no longer children around their father's altar. They had grown to manhood now; they had realised themselves; they had become conscious of the need of personal communion. So Abel brought of the firstlings of his flock, and Cain brought of the fruit of the ground; the one was a shepherd and the other a husbandman, and they did wisely and well in bringing of their own. Yet the Lord had respect unto Abel and his offering; but unto Cain and his offering the Lord had not respect. How the two brothers perceived the difference of God's favour we do not know, for the Bible does not tell us. It may have been that fire fell on Abel's altar; it may have been that the one smoke rose heavenward and the other crept and curled along the ground; or perhaps there was only an inward witness in their hearts—a peace and joy in Abel's, a loneliness in Cain's—that told them silently how things stood with God. But if we do not know how they read God's differing looks, we do know the divine reasons for the difference. It was unto *Cain* and his offering that the Lord had not respect—it was the spirit behind the gift that made the difference. Had the heart of Cain been as the heart of Abel, the fruits of the ground would have smelled sweet

in heaven. But Cain, for all his energy, was faithless—it was by faith that Abel offered a more excellent sacrifice; and Cain had not been living like righteous Abel—he slew his brother because his deeds were evil. Clearly, therefore, we come to apprehend that the spirit of the givers made the difference; God knew the story of the brothers' lives, and in the light of their lives were their sacrifices treated. What a lesson there is in that for all of us! It is not the amount of our service that is pleasing, it is the motive that inspires and animates it. It is not the sacrifice in itself that heaven looks to; it is the heart that throbs behind the sacrifice. Would not Jesus have us leave our gift upon the very altar, if we have a grudge against our brother at the time? It was that truth which began to dawn on men in this accepted and rejected offering.

A **G**AIN, this is a memorable instance of *how small sins open the door to great ones*. I do not think when Cain and Abel were children that Cain ever dreamed that it would come to this. If you had told him that he would be a murderer one day, he would have scorned the bare suggestion of such evil. Probably the brothers had never got on too well; their tempers were too different for that. The active and strenuous tiller of the ground would have a lurking scorn for the meditative shepherd. Then came the morning of the rejected sacrifice, and the brooding scorn flamed into bitter anger. It is so hard to find that heaven is smiling on the people whom we have long despised. But even yet, Cain had no settled purposes; he only knew that he hated his brother Abel; and every sign of faith he saw in Abel, and every trace and token of his goodness, was like added fuel to the flame. Then came the fateful hour of opportunity; the brothers were alone, out in the field together, and all the passion and bitterness of years leaped out from the wild and wayward heart of Cain—

and Cain rose up against Abel his brother, and slew him. The deed was done in a single instant of time; it was not premeditated, but it was prepared for. The sullen and bitter and angry thoughts of Cain had been making possible this hour on the field. Remember that out of the *heart* come murders. We must bring every *thought* into captivity.

THEN lastly, let us note *the unrest that follows sin*. God did not slay Cain—do we perceive why? Cain was allowed to live, even though a murderer. But God save us all from such an existence as was endured henceforward by the murderer! His work ceased to interest him, he lost all heart in it; ‘when thou tillest the ground, it shall not yield unto thee her strength.’ He became a fugitive and a vagabond upon the earth, with a mark on him that no man could efface. We read of another man, who also was a wanderer, that he bore on his body ‘the marks of the Lord Jesus’—compare *his* life with the life of Cain! It all means that when we sin against God we become haunted with an undying restlessness. There is no rest for the wicked, saith my God. How sweet to remember that there is One among us, who says, ‘Come unto Me, and I will give you rest.’

THIRD SUNDAY

Evening

THE BOYHOOD OF JESUS

Passage to be read: Luke ii. 40-52.

ONE of the holiest doctors of the mediæval church, who was placed by Dante among the saints of paradise, said a striking thing about the youth of Jesus. ‘Take notice,’ he said, ‘that His doing nothing

wonderful was itself a kind of wonder. As there is power in His actions, so is there power in His retirement and His silence.' When we read the false gospels of the youth of Jesus, we meet with story after story of miracle. Jesus makes clay sparrows and they fly away; or He puts out His hand and touches some plough that Joseph had made badly, and immediately it takes a perfect shape. But in our gospels there is nothing of all that. There is not a whisper of a boyish miracle. Jesus grew and waxed strong in spirit filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was upon Him (v. 40). Let us learn then that uneventful years need never be idle nor unprofitable years. The still river in the secluded valley is gathering waters to bear a city's commerce. Give me health and a day, said Emerson, and I will make the pomp of emperors ridiculous. Give Me, said Jesus, the quiet vale of Nazareth, and the blue sky and the blossoming of flowers, and David and Isaiah, and My village home and God, and I shall be well prepared for My great work.

NOW out of these thirty silent years one incident alone has been preserved. It is the story of Jesus in the Temple, and it is told in our chapter for to-day. We learn that when Jesus was twelve years old, He went up with Marý and Joseph to Jerusalem to keep the passover. And how, when the feast was over, Mary and Joseph set out again for home, and how they missed their child and went to search for Him and found Him in the Temple with the doctors, all that we have known since our days of Sunday-school. Now, why do you think this story has been preserved? Why should it rise, a solitary hill-top, out of the mist that hangs along the valley? It is worth a great deal of pains to discover that.

FIRST, then, let us try to realise *the influence of this journey upon Jesus*. It is always a very memorable hour when a lad for the first time leaves his village home.

He has dreamed of the great world many a night, and now he is going to see it for himself. Hitherto his horizon has been bounded by the range of hills that encircles his quiet home. *Now* he is actually going to cross the barrier, and touch the mystery that lies beyond. There is a stirring of the heart in such an hour, a fresh conception of the greater world; a journey like that will do what a death does sometimes, it awakens the childish spirit to the mysteries. And the lad may come home again, and live with his father and mother, but the world can never more be quite the same. So when Jesus for the first time left His village, it was an ever-memorable day. From Nazareth to Jerusalem was some eighty miles, and almost every mile was rich in memory. Yonder was Shunem, where the woman's son was raised. There was Gilboa, where Saul had perished. That curling smoke rose from the homes of Bethel. These walls and battlements were Jerusalem, at last. So all that Jesus had ever learned at Nazareth, and all that He had drunk in from His mother's lips, thrilled Him, and glowed in His young heart, and by the very glow, expanded it. And what with the growing crowds that joined their company, and what with the ever-changing scenery, the nature of the boy was so enkindled that old things passed, for Him, away. That is one reason why God preserved this incident. It was a momentous hour in the life of Jesus. Luke gives the story as a kind of picture to illustrate the truth that Jesus grew.

NEXT note that in this incident *the character of Jesus is revealed*. For a boy of twelve, reared in a quiet village, Jerusalem at passover must have been paradise. A city has always a fascination for a lad, especially a crowded city on a holiday. What throngs there were! What pillars and stairs and castles! And at any corner might they not hear the tramp of a marching company of Roman soldiers, with glittering helmets and flashing

piques? Now tell me, did you ever hear of a lad who would leave the stir and the busy streets and the gallant soldiers, and steal away into the quiet Temple? Yet that is just what Jesus did, and it is an exquisite glimpse of His young heart. I dare say He heard the music of the trumpet and had a boyish pleasure in the crowd. But here was the Temple He had heard of so often at Nazareth, and here were the doctors who could answer all His questions. Many a time at home He had questioned Mary, and Mary had said: 'Ah, child! I do not understand; it would take the Temple doctors to answer that.' And now the Temple doctors were beside Him, and Jesus forgot the crowds—forgot His mother—in His passionate eagerness to ask and know. No doubt when all the companies turned homeward, not a few children were missing besides Jesus. No doubt when the first evening fell, other mothers turned back to seek their boys. And one would find her child among the soldiers; and another would find her child in the bazaars. Mary alone found Jesus in the Temple. Is it not a priceless glance into a spirit whose consuming passion was the things of God?

LASTLY, this incident has been preserved because in it we have *Jesus' dawning sense of His mission to the world*. The age of twelve was an important period for a Jewish boy; it was the time when he ceased to be a child, and in the letter of the law became a man. It was at twelve, according to the Jews, that Moses had left the house of Pharaoh's daughter. It was at twelve that Samuel had been called. It was at twelve that King Josiah, of the tender heart, had launched forth in reform. But more important still, it was at twelve that a Jewish boy began to work; he was then apprenticed, if I may say so, to a trade. So Mary and Joseph, travelling to Jerusalem, would be much in talk about their son's career. They would often kneel on the grass

by the roadside, and cry to the God of Abraham to guide them in choosing rightly for their beloved boy. And here was the answer to their evening prayers—how different from all that they had dreamed!—‘Wist ye not that I must be about My Father’s business?’ How much that meant for Jesus we cannot tell. How far He had seen into the dark yet glorious future, we shall know better when we see Him face to face. But at least He was conscious that He stood apart, and felt, as man had never felt before, the nearness and the glory of God’s Fatherhood, and knew that henceforward life was to be to Him an absolute devotion to His Father’s will. Then He went back with Mary and with Joseph, and came to Nazareth and was subject unto them; but His mother kept all these sayings in her heart.

FOURTH SUNDAY

Morning

THE FLOOD

Passages to be read : Gen. vii. 1-16 ; viii. 15-22.

WITH the exception of some of the black tribes, there is no branch of the human race that has not a tradition of the flood. These traditions, of course, differ in many respects, and regard the event from many different standpoints, but in general features they are so unvarying that it is impossible to regard the story as a myth. You can picture a family of young children living in a cottage which on a winter's night, after long rains, is flooded. Some of their neighbours in the hamlet may be drowned, but this little family escapes on some hastily built raft. Well, the children grow up and they scatter through the world—one goes to Canada, another to South Africa—and there they face the trials and pass through the joys and sorrows that fall to the lot of every one of us. But always in some corner of their brain there lies the memory of that terrible hour of childhood. If you listened to the account of it from one of them, you would find that it differed from the other's story. There is nothing harder than to keep unsullied through long years the truth about the happenings of our childhood. But at least you would feel, as you passed from sister to sister, and heard the tale from brother after brother, that there must have been some hour of horror in the old home to have grooved these separate memories so. Now so

is it with the story of the flood. The flood came before the family had scattered. God's children were still in their ancestral home when the hour of tragedy and death arrived. And when to-day the brothers and the sisters, scattered far and wide across the world, cherish the memory of that far-off hour, we cannot but think of that far-off hour as real. The flood then is not an idle story. It is the record of an actual event. And I wish to find out some of God's purposes in giving it this large place in His Word.

FIRST, then, it teaches us the truth *that God is watching*. Our Saviour has spoken of that, and so we put it first. For we are always tempted to think, as the years roll, that there is no eye fixed upon the scene. Day succeeds day, and night moves after night; men eat and drink and love and marry and die, and all is so orderly and uninterrupted that they almost forget the power on the throne. But the story of the flood was meant to teach that the Lord God is not indifferent. He does not sit apart in royal state, unconcerned with human sin and sorrow. He seems to be idle, but the hour will come when He will bare His arm and work in majesty. Men were utterly vile before the flood, and God saw that. But among them there was one man who lived a holy life, and God saw that. Men thought they could live and sin just as they pleased, but the day dawned when they saw their tragic error. Let none of us think, then, that God does not see us. If we are struggling in evil surroundings to be good, He knows it all. No Noah can ever be hidden from the gaze of Him whose eyes go to and fro upon the earth.

AGAIN, it teaches us *that we are saved by faith*. The writer to the Hebrews dwells on that. There is no more sublime faith in the world's history than the faith

of Noah in preparing at God's word. The skies were not dark when the first beams were laid. There was no murmur of uprising waters. The sun shone bright and all the flowers blossomed, and the dew was as sparkling as on the leaves of Eden. Do you not think that people laughed at Noah? Did not the schoolboys mock him as they passed? It was the work of a dotard, in that golden weather, to be getting ready for a deluge. But Noah had been taught to scorn appearances, and he toiled on undaunted in his faith. By faith, then, Noah was saved through grace, and that not of himself, it was the gift of God. He had nothing but God's bare word to hold to, but he held to it, though everybody mocked; and he found at last how wise it had been to walk by faith and not by sight. Do we know anything of Noah's faith? Are we ready to be true though others smile? Are we willing to pray and to believe that sin spells death, though all the appearances should be against us? God wishes us to learn that lesson very early.

ONCE more it teaches us *that God saves by separating*. That is one of the greatest of all Bible truths. Let us never forget the care and the love and the patience wherewith God separated Noah from the world. The thought of the ark and the plan of the ark were God's. It was God who gave Noah strength to do the work. And at last, when all was ready for the voyaging, we read that it was God who shut them in. Did Noah grumble at his loss of liberty? Did he think it hard to lose the fair sweet world? Was it odious to him to be confined and limited after the long years in vale and meadow? I think he saw the wisdom of the limits when he stepped out to the large liberty of Ararat. So does God deal with every one of us. He draws us apart; He saves by separation. And at first, perhaps, when we are called to cross-bearing, we think it hard that our old liberty should go. But gradually through our separation

comes our freedom. The waters assuage, we pass out from love's imprisonment. Through our separation we have entered a new world, and where the spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty.

THEN, lastly, it teaches us *that God saves for service.*

It was for the world's sake that Noah was brought through. He was preserved that mankind might start again, and so was he a forerunner of the second Adam. God never saves us merely to enjoy. God saves us that we may do His will. A man is brought through the deep waters for the sake of others, and his first task is always to build an altar. Note, too, that of the beasts and birds that were preserved, some were immediately offered on that altar. They, too, no less than Ham and Shem, were saved for service, and they served best by being sacrificed. Is not that sometimes the case with all of us? Was it not so supremely with the Lord? He was brought through the deeps and billows of Gethsemane to serve mankind, and His crowning service was being sacrificed on Calvary.

FOURTH SUNDAY

Evening

JOHN THE WITNESS-BEARER

Passage to be read : John i. 14-34.

THE thought of witness-bearing finds ample expression in the Bible. 'Witness' is one of the keywords of the Scripture, occurring in the early records of Genesis, and in the writings of prophets and apostles. It makes an interesting study to collect the

passages in which the word 'witness' is found. Sometimes it is God who is the witness; at other times it is the arching heaven above us. Then we read that when Joshua had made a covenant with the people, he took a great stone and set it up under an oak-tree, and said, 'Behold this stone shall be a witness unto us' (Josh. xxiv. 26-7). Christ Himself is spoken of as a witness—'Behold I have given Him for a witness to the people' (Isa. lv. 4); Paul tells us that God had never left Himself without a witness (Acts xiv. 17); and it was at the feet of that same Paul that the witnesses laid down their clothes, in the hour when Stephen cried 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit' (Acts vii. 58). Let us remember, too, that when we believe on Jesus, there is a witness which we have in ourselves (1 John v. 10). Such passages as these help to make plain to us what a large place the witness has in Scripture. The Baptist is not isolated in his witness-bearing; he is one of a great and ever-growing company. Let us try, then, to gather up to-day some of the things to which John bore witness. It may be that we also, like the Baptist, may be sent to be witness-bearers of Christ Jesus.

FIRST, then, John bore witness *to the presence of Christ*.

The Jews were eagerly expecting the Messiah. They were thrilled with the hope that He was coming. God had awakened such a longing in their hearts that they knew the advent was not far away. So were they straining their eyes to the east and to the south; so were they anxiously awaiting some splendour of arrival; and John bore witness that the Christ they looked for was standing among them, even while he spoke (v. 26). He was not hidden in the clouds of heaven; He was not lurking in some far concealment; He would not burst upon them in any visible glory, nor with any credentials that would be instantly accepted. Even while John spoke the Christ was there, moving among

them as a man unknown—John bore witness to a present Lord. Now that is a witness which we all may share in. We may show our neighbours that Jesus is among them. We may make it plain to our visitors, as John did, that Jesus of Nazareth is not far away. And we do this, not so much by speech, or by having the name of Jesus on our lips, as by revealing His love and power and patience in the general tenor of our lives. There are some men who immediately impress us with the fact that they walk in the company of Christ. There is no explaining the impression that they make unless it be that they are living with Jesus—their secret is, they have a Friend. *That* is true witness-bearing, and it is like the Baptist's. It is a witness to the presence of the Lord.

AGAIN, John bore witness *to the greatness of Christ*. Of course the Jews were expecting a great Saviour; all their long history made them sure of that. The threefold dignities of king and priest and prophet were to mingle in the person of Messiah. But greatness has very various meanings; it is touched with a thousand differences on a thousand lips; and when a nation falls from its high ideals, as the Jews had fallen in the time of John, the great man of the popular imagination is not the great man in the sight of God. Now this was part of the witness-bearing of the Baptist, to reveal the true greatness and glory of Messiah; to single Him out as He moved amid the people, and proclaim that He was greater than them all. There were no insignia on Jesus' breast; He was not clothed in any robes of state; there was nothing in His adornment or His retinue to mark Him off as one who was truly great. And it was John's work to pierce through all disguise, and see the grace and glory of the Man, and cry that though He had no beauty that men should desire Him, yet none was worthy to unloose His shoe-latchet (v. 27). In different ways, and yet in the same spirit, we should all be witness-

bearers to Christ's greatness. It is always possible so to think, and act, and live, that men will feel we serve a great Commander. He who thinks meanly, and does petty and foolish deeds, and has no lofty ideals clearly before him, is not commending an exalted Saviour. It is in a spirit that is touched to spiritual greatness, however humble be the daily round, that witness is borne to the greatness of the Lord.

ONCE more, John bore witness *to the lowliness and gentleness of Christ*. I think that if John had been a time-server, and had cared only to flatter Jewish prejudice, he would have told his audience that the Spirit had descended, not like a dove, but like an eagle. It was not a dove for which the Jews were looking. They wanted a power to expel the Roman. What a chance for a false prophet this would have been, considering the symbolism of the Roman eagles! But John could only tell what he had seen—a faithful witness will not lie (Prov. xiv. 5)—and he bare record saying, 'I saw the Spirit descending like a *dove*' (v. 32). That means that almost in the teeth of his own stern heart, John bore witness to a dovelike Saviour. There was to be a brooding peace about Messiah, a lowly gentleness, a still small voice. And when we remember what John's own nature was, and think of the Christ of common expectation, we see how true and faithful was this witness-bearing. May not we, too, bear witness in our lives to the lowly tenderness of our Redeemer? May *we* not make it plain, as John did, that the Lord whom we know is filled with the dovelike Spirit? We do that whenever we master temper, or check the bitter word, or take the lowest place. We do that when our unforgiving hearts, and our stubborn and proud and selfish wills, become imbued with that love and thoughtful tenderness which is the very spirit of Christ Jesus.

LASTLY, John bore witness *to the sacrifice of Christ*. 'Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world' (v. 29). John had roused the conscience of the people; he had awakened in them the sleeping sense of sin. Jewish missionaries tell us that to-day that is still the first thing they strive to do. But when the sense of guilt was roused in them—what then? Then John's great work of witness-bearing reached its crown. So it may be with every one of us. We, too, may be witness-bearers of the sacrifice. We may so hate and abhor and shun all sin, we may so feel the price of our redemption, we may so live in the sweet sense of pardon, we may be so hopeful for the lowest and worst men, that our life (unknown to us perhaps) shall be a witness-bearing to Christ crucified.

FIFTH SUNDAY

Morning

THE COVENANT WITH NOAH

Passage to be read : Gen. ix. 1-17.

WHEN a man has been brought through the deeps of a great illness, and has had leisure to think of his bygone years in it, he often rises from his sickness with the strong conviction that God is calling him to a fresh start. Or when a man has had a narrow escape for his life, and for an hour has been, as it were, facing eternity, he, too, often becomes conscious of a summons to set his face steadfastly towards Jerusalem. Such must have been the experience of Noah. Such thoughts must have been burning in his heart as he stepped out on the Armenian Highlands. How fitting, then, that the first voice of God that reached him in his new-found liberty should have been, as it were, the seal of his conviction. It was God's will that a fresh start should be made. Great judgments are the heralds of great progress. God has an eye to to-morrow no less than to yesterday, whenever the fountains of the deep are unlocked. Hence, in the opening verses of our chapter we have the divine provisions for a fuller and richer life than mankind had been living before the flood. A new sovereignty over all creatures was given to man. If Noah had had a touch of David's genius, he would have broken out in a song like the eighth psalm. Flesh was to be the food of man now—perhaps man had lived on fruits and herbs before. And in God's words about the punishment

of murder, man learned that lesson without which advance is impossible—the sacredness and the sanctity of life.

BUT there is another effect which an illness or a hairbreadth escape may have—it may haunt a man with a fear lest it recur, and good and steady work is rarely possible to a heart that is vexed and harassed by such anxiety. Now Noah was a man of sterling faith; but he was human, and in some respects a child. Do you not think that, as he moved in his new world, the fear of another flood sometimes troubled him? When the wind howled, would not his cheek grow pale? When the torrents of rain swept on his mountain-tent, would he not waken in the darkness with a dread that here was another flood without another ark? And in the morning, when the sun shone again, and all the terrors of midnight were allayed, still he would move among the hills and valleys with the step of a man uncertain of his tenure. It is not in such a spirit that the race progresses. Even the crofters made little of their crofts while they were burdened with insecurity of tenure. So God, not only for His child Noah's sake, but for the sake of all the human family, entered into a covenant with Noah.

NOW what is a covenant? Well, it is something of great importance, for the word is constantly found in the Old Testament. The word 'religion' is not found there at all, but the word 'covenant' occurs over three hundred times. A covenant is a mutual agreement; it is a compact or bargain between two people or sets of people; and among the Hebrews it was used in the freest way of any transaction involving mutual pledging. But gradually the word drew itself apart; it was linked with august and venerable thoughts; it became the term for these grander and weightier compacts, whose issues for weal or woe might prove incalculable. Of such a nature was the covenant of marriage; of such the

covenant between God and man. Let us learn that there are three great covenants between God and man in the record of Holy Scripture. There is the New Covenant of Jesus Christ, ratified by the shedding of His precious blood, and signed to us by the expressive symbols of the broken bread and the poured-out wine. There is the Old Covenant, first made with Abraham, and finally established on Mount Sinai, and the sign and seal of that was circumcision. But besides these there is this covenant with Noah, and through Noah with everything that breathes, and the sign and seal of it is the rainbow. Do you see how that covenant strengthened Noah's heart? Here is a poor woman living in a cottage, and she is anxious to beautify and to adorn her cottage, but if she may be turned adrift at the next term, what is the use of giving her heart to it? But her landlord comes to her, he strikes a compact with her; he says, 'I give you the cottage and garden to enjoy, and I undertake not to dispossess you'—will she not give heart and hand to the work then? So did God come to insecure and uncertain Noah. In His coming was the almighty pledge of steadfastness. And we shall never know how much we owe to that until we see the rainbow round the throne.

NOW let me draw three lessons from the rainbow; and first, *there is unchanging purpose in the most changeable things.* All things are changeable, even the very hills; but there is nothing quite so changeable as the clouds. Not for two seconds on end, so are we taught, is the form and outline of any cloud the same. Yet that was the tablet whereon was signed the covenant that was to be unchanging and for ever. Does not that mean that through all change and movement there run the eternal purposes of God? It is through various experience, changeable as any cloudland, that the steadfast will of God is being wrought. Next, *what we most dread God can illuminate.* If there was one thing full of terror to

Noah, it was the cloud. We cannot realise what awful memories rushed on him when he saw the black and thunderous cloud-banks. Yet it was there that the Almighty set His bow. It was that very terror He illuminated. He touched with the radiance of His master-hand the very object that was the dread of Noah. Lastly, *there is mercy over the portal of God's dwelling*. For the clouds in Scripture are God's pavilion. He cometh in a cloud; clouds and thick darkness are about His throne. It was there, then, that God set His bow, token of a steadfast and a sparing mercy. Far off, in these dim and early ages, man learned that there was mercy where God dwelt.

FIFTH SUNDAY

Evening

JOHN THE FORERUNNER

Passage to be read: Luke iii. 1-18.

IT is one of the ways of God in the ordering of history to grant forerunners of great events or persons. The widespread superstition that such things as meteors or earthquakes are the heralds of mighty happenings in history, is nothing but a mistaken application of heaven's great principle of forerunning. In the stormy gusts and the sweeping rains of March we have the forerunners of the beauty of the summer. In illness and sorrow and the open grave we have often the forerunners of changed and useful lives. Before the full sunshine of the Reformation there was the dawn in Wycliffe and his 'poor preachers.' And the earthquake and the bursting of gates at midnight, was the preparation for the Philippian jailor's joy. So John was the great forerunner of Jesus. It was he who roused

the people from their lethargy. He touched the national conscience by his preaching. He made men eager, expectant, and open-eyed. In the far-reaching words of his great namesake he was sent 'to bear witness of the Light, that all men through him might believe' (John i. 7). What then was the character of John? What features impress us in these verses from Luke? That is what we must endeavour to find out.

FIRST, then, we note that *John stood alone, and yet he was undaunted*. We know that it is easier to be brave when we have brave friends on our right hand and our left. It is a great assistance to a soldier's heart to be one of a regiment of gallant fellows. A little boy will not mind the darkness much, so long as he knows that some one is beside him; it is when he awakens, and finds that he is solitary, that we hear the bitter crying in the night. Now remember that John the Baptist was alone. He lived in the desert of the Jordan valley. He cut himself off from the haunts and homes of men; he did not mingle in glad human companies. Yet from first to last he was conspicuously brave. His courage shone like a star in the dark night. His voice never lost its trumpet-note, though other voices failed to answer it. John came (we read) in the spirit of Elijah. But in *this* respect John was greater than Elijah. He was more than cousin, in this matter, to the Saviour, whose prophet and whose forerunner he was. For Jesus trod the winepress alone; in His great hour all forsook Him and fled; yet He set His face steadfastly towards Jerusalem, and cried on Calvary, 'It is finished.'

AGAIN, we observe that *John was a dreamer, and yet he was most practical*. When I call him a dreamer I do not use the word slightly, I use it in its best and noblest sense. It was to be one mark of Messianic times that the old men were to dream dreams in it, and though

John was far from being an old man, yet this touch of the latter day was on his heart. The word of the living God had come to him. He was preparing for a coming Saviour. He woke and worked and preached and prayed, with the vision before him of the advent of Messiah. Yet read his preaching, when the people flocked to him, and tell me if anything could be more intensely practical. 'Bring forth fruits worthy of repentance, and say not, We have Abraham to our father' (v. 8). 'Exact no more than that which is appointed you' (v. 13). 'Do violence to no man, and be content with your wages' (v. 14). What teaching could be more plain and practical than that? Let us learn from John, then (the greatest born of women), that the highest character embraces dream and duty. It knows the value of the present task; but it has its vision of a Christ-filled to-morrow. It does not lose itself in things to be. Nor does it despise the humble round of drudgery. It does life's common work with strenuous faithfulness, but never forgets that Jesus is at hand.

ONCE more, we mark that *John was very stern, and yet he was most wonderfully humble*. We always think of John as the stern prophet. There is the mark of severity about the man. The spirit of the wild and desolate wilderness, where the dislodging of any stone might show a viper, seemed to have cast its tincture on his heart. Now we do not associate sternness with humility. It is the sister of pride more often than of lowliness. And the great glory of John's character is this, that with all his severity he was so humble. Men had been deeply stirred by the Baptist's message. They began to question if he might not be Messiah. Was it not just such a leader that they needed if the kingdom of Israel was to be restored? So all men mused in their hearts of John, whether he were the Christ or not (v. 15). It was then that the grandeur of John's character shone

forth. 'He confessed and denied not, but confessed, I am not the Christ.' 'He must increase, but I must decrease.' 'I am not worthy to unloose His shoe-latchet.' Stern in the presence of evil and of vice, stern in the presence of Herod and his court, John was as humble as a little child before the feet of Him who was to come. Other prophets have been as stern as John. Other saints have been as true and lowly. But it is the union of his matchless heroism with lowliness and joyous self-effacement that makes John the greatest born of women.

THEN, lastly, we see that *John had imperfect views of Christ, and yet he glorified Him.* What kind of Messiah, think you, did John expect? Read over the verses again and you will see. It was a Messiah whose fan was in His hand, and who would burn the chaff with fire unquenchable (v. 17). Now when Christ came, He did indeed come to winnow. What John foresaw was true, and terribly true. But it was also true that He would not strive nor cry; that He was gentle, and loved the gatherings of men; that a bruised reed He would not break, and smoking flax He would not quench. All that had been but dimly seen by John. It was that which vexed him as he lay in prison. The Baptist had imperfect views of Christ—and yet how nobly did he glorify Him! So you and I may have imperfect views of God—for clouds and darkness are around His throne—yet if we be brave and earnest as our hero was, knowing God's infinite worth and our unworthiness, we too shall glorify Him, and enjoy Him for ever.

SIXTH SUNDAY

Morning

LOT'S CHOICE

Passage to be read : Gen. xiii. 1-18.

IT is notable that when Abraham came up from Egypt he made straight for the place where he had built an altar. He had been moving away from his Leader down in Egypt, but now he returned to God, who was his Home. But Abraham was a very rich man now, and Lot, his nephew, had shared in his prosperity, and here (for the first time, though not the last) wealth proved a source of trouble among relatives. Quarrels arose between their respective servants; there were clashings and bickerings, with perhaps the drawing of daggers, when the herds were driven to the wells at evening. And the Canaanites and Perizzites who dwelt around took no little pleasure in these herdsmen's quarrels, much as the world and its newspapers now are secretly delighted at any dissensions among God's professing people. Abraham saw that this could not go on. He was too wise and far too statesmanlike to tolerate it. He took Lot to a fair coign of vantage, showed him the country stretching away below them, and suggested in the interests of peace, that they should separate, each to his own domain. Then Lot, as all the children know, chose Sodom. He led away his flocks and herds to Sodom. And through all the ages that have come and gone since then, and amid the million choices they have seen, no choice is graven deeper on the memory than this so blind and tragic choice of Lot.

NOW first let us note *how magnanimous true faith can be*. Abraham was the older of the two; he was the uncle, Lot was the nephew. It was for Abraham, as the older man, to take the first place in the choice of territory. No one could have said he dealt unfairly, had he selected first, and given Lot the residue. In the East, even more than in the West, all would at once have bowed to that decision. But with a magnanimity that is very captivating, Abraham humbled himself before his nephew, and left the decision of the whole matter with him. Do you see the source of that fine generosity? Can you trace to its roots that large and generous treatment? It sprang from a deep and living trust in God. Abraham had learned that God was his Provider, and his future was sure when all was left to Him. It is thus that faith in the presence and power of God makes a man incapable of petty dealing. He is always more eager to insist upon the promises, than to insist on the assertion of his rights. He can sing:—

‘Not mine—not mine the choice
In things or great or small;
Be Thou my Guide, my Guard, my Strength,
My Wisdom, and my All.’

NEXT mark *how, sooner or later, the real man is discovered*. We must not forget that Lot, no less than Abraham, had gone out, not knowing whither he went. He had fared forth valiantly with Abraham, as if he, too, had had a call from God. Perhaps Lot had been even more ardent than his uncle; he may have displayed more eager enthusiasm in the journey. Had you seen the two pilgrims, as they moved towards Canaan, you might have thought that the younger was Greatheart. But the hour came when the younger stood revealed. This choice declared the character of Lot. He proved unequal to the strain of this great moment, when

Abraham offered him the land he might select. Such moments come to every traveller. God's heavenward way is ordered and guided so. If we have only been fired by the heroism of others, and never heard for ourselves the call of God, the hour is sure to dawn when we shall fail. Nothing but faith (though it be as a grain of mustard-seed) will stand the strain and test of journeying years, and hold a man true to the noblest and the best, when lower things (which are sweet) are in his grasp.

A GAIN, observe *how disastrous a choice may be when God is not considered.* Do my readers see what the mistake of Lot was? It was a mistake that is repeated every day. It was a choice that was made solely by the eye, without a thought of the interests of the soul. If life had been nothing but a matter of shepherding, the decision of Lot would have been fully justified. The valley of the lower Jordan was like Eden, and the pasturage was like the beauty—unsurpassed. But there is more in life than the outward and material; there are eternal interests, there is the soul and God; and all this was clean forgotten by Lot when his eye rested on the fair land of Sodom. There is not a hint that he asked God to direct him. There is not one sign that he ever thought of God. He was carried away by immediate advantages, spite of all that the companionship of Abraham had done for him—and he woke to discover, in the after days, that selfishness is a most tragical mistake. Do you think he ever would have chosen Sodom if he could have unrolled the curtain of to-morrow? Do you think he contemplated such marriages for his daughters, or the fiery destruction, or the pillar of salt? If only some angel had forewarned him of that, how he would have spurned the beauty of the plain! Learn then how foolish and fatal are all choices that take in nothing but the seen and temporal. It is always disastrous to ignore or neglect God.

LASTLY, note *the supreme importance of a life's direction*. Lot pitched his tent *toward* Sodom. There was no fault in the actual place of pitching; it was just like many another scene of bivouac; but it was *toward* Sodom—that was the evil of it—and the tragedy lay in the direction. Remember then that there may be things and places which are not actually evil in themselves, and yet they may be dark and ominous if they indicate the direction of a life. It is not my actual achievement which is of supreme importance; it is the direction which my life is taking. Daniel opened his windows *towards* Jerusalem; Lot pitched his tent *towards* Sodom. In which direction, think you, are you travelling? Towards what are you making day by day?

SIXTH SUNDAY

Evening

THE TEMPTATION OF JESUS

Passages to be read: Matt. iii. 13-17; iv. 1-11.

WHATEVER view we take of the temptation—whether it was an inward struggle or an actual scene—the one thing to remember is *its intense reality*. Prayerfully and reverently we must strive to realise that the temptations of Jesus were unutterably severe. It is not difficult to realise Christ's brotherhood in suffering. It is very difficult to do so in temptation. And one great reason of that is, that in *our* temptations, we are so conscious of sinful impulses within. But when we remember that our temptations sometimes touch not what is worst, but what is noblest in us; when we think that without the sorest and fiercest trial, the thought of sinlessness has little meaning, then we dimly perceive

how intense temptation might be to a spotless and holy Saviour. There is nothing more heavenly than a mother's love, yet sometimes a mother is tempted most severely just because she loves her children so. If men were always tempted at their weakest, we could hardly understand a tempted Jesus. If our temptations only lit where we were worst, Christ (who had no worst) could not have been tempted. But when we see (and time and again we see it) that the sorest onset may be on the saintliest side, then we know that the temptations of Jesus may have been unutterably sore, since Jesus was unutterably good.

WITH such thoughts we may approach the scene ; and if we would hope to understand it, we must remember *the time of its occurrence*. The *place* of its occurrence matters less, though to a heart filled with the loveliness of Galilee the grimness of the desert would be awful. But the *time* of the temptation matters much, for the Tempter is a master in his choice of hours. Jesus, then, had been baptized in Jordan. He had been endowed with gifts from heaven for His ministry. All He had dimly seen upon the hills of Nazareth now rose before Him as His mission to mankind. In such tumultuous hours men crave for solitude. In such an hour the Spirit drove Jesus to the desert. It was, then, on the threshold of His ministry, and facing His life-work with its infinite issues, that the Tempter came to Him. It is in the light of His service and His sacrifice that we shall reach the inward meaning of the scene. These are the dark hours through which Jesus passed, on the threshold of His glorious career.

THE first temptation seems a simple one. 'If Thou be the Son of God,' says the Tempter, 'command that these stones may be made bread.' Jesus had been fasting forty days ; now He was in the dire pangs of

hunger. What possible harm or danger could there be in satisfying the pangs of hunger so? Had not God rained down manna in the desert? Had not Elijah been miraculously fed by ravens? The real temptation lay in using for Himself the powers that had been given Him to use for man. In Jordan He stood where sinful men had stood. He was baptized in Jordan that He might show His brotherhood. He did not stand *above* John on the bank, He went and stood *beside* John in the river. And *here*, at the very outset of His ministry, Jesus is tempted to snap the bond of brotherhood, and to supply His private needs in ways that were impossible for man. May we not all be tempted in ways like that? When a man is tempted to a selfish life, or to use for himself alone the graces and the means that have been given him in trust for others, then is the Tempter whispering to him, as he spake to Jesus in the wilderness. And whenever a man denies himself, and sacrifices something for a brother, he is sharing in the victory of Christ.

THE second temptation was of a different kind. The devil taketh Him up into the Holy City, and setteth Him on a pinnacle of the Temple, and saith, 'If Thou be the Son of God, cast Thyself down, for it is written, He shall give His angels charge concerning Thee.' Now, what was it that made Jesus shun this test? Firstly, there was His clear and instant certainty that such an act was not trusting, but tempting, God. Jesus was man, and in the needs and in the sorrows of life He would have ample room for showing how He trusted. But to devise experiments, and leave the path of duty, for the sole purpose of putting God to proof, was to declare the weakness of His faith and not its strength. Then, too—how would Messiah come? We know the kind of coming which the Jews expected. It was to be something startling and dramatic, as in a flash of glory from the Temple. Was it not, then, part of Christ's temptation to lower His

aims to common expectation? Was it not suggested to Him to renounce His quiet way and to yield to the expectation of the crowd? It was a temptation to be untrue to self; and being so, to be untrue to God.

THEN comes *the third temptation*—that of the kingdoms and the glory of them. And we feel the magnificence of this temptation; it was a tribute to the royalty of Jesus. For smaller men, smaller temptations serve. A little thing may tempt a little heart. But in Christ Jesus the Tempter knows the king—and therefore He is tempted with the kingdoms. Now, do you see the power of that temptation? It was these very kingdoms Christ had come to win. Through service, and suffering, and blood, and death, every knee was to bow to Him, and every tongue confess. Then comes the devil with his swift suggestion. He throws himself into line with Jesus' hope. He whispers to Him that there is an easier way than Calvary for winning the dominion of the world. Then Jesus said, 'Get thee behind Me, Satan; for it is written, Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and Him only shalt thou serve.' Then the devil leaveth Him, and, behold, angels came and ministered unto Him.

SEVENTH SUNDAY

Morning

ABRAM'S VISION

Passage to be read : Gen. xv. 1-18.

ABRAM had now returned from his battle with the Northern Kings, and as he settled down again into his shepherd-life, and returned to the peace and quiet of his days, we can understand with what commingled feelings he would look back on that valiant campaign. True, he had been successful in his fighting; he had driven these northern confederates before him; but was Chedorlaomer likely to sit still under such an indignity as that? The most powerful chieftains in the land were now Abraham's enemies, and some day they would seek a wild revenge. Such thoughts would be present to the lonely exile; he would feel how precarious and insecure his foothold was; it is often in the hours that follow our noble victories that we are oppressed by the burdens of reaction; and it was *then* that God spake to Abraham in a vision, and said, 'Fear not, Abram, I am thy shield.' Do you mark how timely that assurance was? Do you see how it chimed with the distress of Abraham? It was the very word he needed in his darkness if he was to be roused into brave activity again. Abraham was learning what we all come to learn, that the message of God meets our peculiar need, that the revelation of the passing hour is the revelation for which the hour calls. When we are in darkness Jehovah is our light; when surrounded by foes,—'Fear not, I am thy shield.'

BUT Abraham had still one plea to proffer—there was no sound of childish laughter in his house. God had been good to him; He had never failed him yet, but ten years had passed and Abraham had no heir. It was the pride of the Jew to see children round his table, it was in them he found his hope of immortality; and what was the promise of Canaan worth to Abraham, if none should follow him to hold the land? So oftentimes, just because one thing is lacking, all that a man possesses may seem vain. There may be melodies innumerable in the lute, but one little rift may silence all the music. Just as the powers which the eye possesses, of seeing ocean and loch and sunset and morning sky, may all be marred, and spoiled in their happy exercise, by the lodging of one tiny particle of dust, so one small grievance may fret a man's whole nature, and take the joy from all his large activities, and mingle itself with all he is and does, till the glory of his whole circuit has been dimmed. There can be little doubt that it was so with Abraham. 'What wilt Thou give me, seeing I go childless?'—what is the use of all the rest to me, if the one desire of my heart is baffled? We see how deep the disappointment was by the instinctive nature of the cry. Then God took Abraham into the silent night, He pointed to the thousand thousand stars; He said to him, 'It was I who made these to shine, and as the stars of heaven shall thy seed be.' And spite of the ten years of hope deferred, and spite of all seeming impossibility, Abraham cried, 'Lord, I believe; help Thou mine unbelief,' and his faith was counted to him for righteousness.

THEN Abraham asked for a sign of his inheritance, and God was pleased to stoop down and give him one. God entered into a covenant with Abraham by means of a ritual that was well understood. To-day, if two men are entering into contract, they write it down on parchment, and then seal it. But in those early

days there would be little penmanship, and bargains were ratified by sign and symbol. One symbol was the taking of certain beasts, cutting them in halves, and laying the halves opposite each other on the ground; then down the narrow lane between these portions, slowly and solemnly the contracting parties walked. They meant that if they proved false to their bond, let them meet the same fate as these dissevered limbs; nor could they look on these bleeding and mangled halves, that so lately had known the mystery of life, without feeling how in union there was safety, and how in separation there was death. Such was the symbolism which God stooped down to use in ratifying His covenant with Abraham. Abraham was commanded to kill and halve the beasts, and he did so in the hours of early morning. Then all day long, while the sun rose and sank, and while the birds wheeled over him in the hope of carrion, Abraham watched for the goings of his God. Then fell the night, and a deep sleep came on Abraham, but in his sleep he still saw the sundered creatures. And lo! between them there moved a burning lamp, and beside the lamp a smoking furnace. What was the lamp? It was the light of God; it was the vision of the brightness of His glory. What was the smoking furnace? Was it not Abraham, and Abraham's seed with their dark yet fiery trials? Did not Israel come to regard their years in Egypt as the time when they were in the 'furnace of iron' (Deut. iv. 20)? So Abraham knew that the covenant was ratified. The word of God was sealed, and could not fail. I think when he woke he must have cried, like Jacob, 'This is none other than the gate of heaven.'

NOW let us note three lessons in this vision; and first, *increase of knowledge brings increase of sorrow*. When the sun went down, we read, a horror, even a great darkness, fell on Abraham (v. 12). When he first started

for Canaan, he was very ignorant. He only knew he would possess the land. But *now* the pathway leading down through Egypt, and all the weariness and the waiting of four hundred years were revealed to him by the voice of God. It was a sad though it was a glorious revelation. There came a shadow with it that deepened knowledge. Abraham was not the first and not the last to learn the noble sorrow of all progress. Next note how *God's love allows no hurry*—the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet full (v. 16). Till the day came that their cup was running over, the seed of Israel should not possess the land. Not even for Israel would the Amorites be cut off, till the full hour of their doom had come. So do we see the impartiality of God; so do we learn the justice of His mercy: God's love is so great it allows of no despair, but it is so holy it allows no hurry. Lastly, *where the furnace smokes there is a lamp that burns*, the light of heaven is near us in our trouble. When the pall hangs heavy, and we move among the dead, with little to cheer us in the murky gloom, even then, close to the furnace is the lamp—the presence of the covenant-keeping God.

SEVENTH SUNDAY

Evening

THE FIRST DISCIPLES

Passage to be read: John i. 35-51.

WHEN a man has risen to great eminence, we are always interested in the story of his childhood. We listen eagerly to any scrap of information about his earliest days. And the deep interest that centres in these verses springs from the fact that here are

the beginnings of fellowships and friendships that have changed the world. When we think of all that Christ was to be to John, and of all that John was going to be to Christ; when we recall what the future had in store for Peter, we feel what great issues lay in these first meetings, that are so simply and so quietly told. It is not often with any stir or uproar that the great moments come to men or women. They are not heralded with any sound of trumpet—the way of the Lord is not prepared like that. Quietly and unobtrusively two men follow Jesus, or a friend gives a word of welcome to a friend, or a brother goes and seeks out a brother—and from that hour all things shall be changed.

NOTE first to *what different natures Jesus appeals.*

Four or five men are mentioned in our verses, and we know a little about the character of each. We know enough to convince us of the differences between the natures of these first disciples. Peter was eager and enthusiastic; John had a perfect genius for loving. Philip was slow, deliberative, cautious; Nathanael had a most unworldly and gentle heart. Yet all were drawn to the one Lord and Master, and took their place in the ranks of the disciples. Some teachers appeal to certain kinds of men, or they attract those who are educated to one level; but it was one of the mysteries of Jesus that He drew to Himself such distinct and diverse men. Let the teacher of a class remember that. Let the mother lay it to heart among her children. Their natures are utterly different one from the other, yet all may find their friend in the one Lord.

AGAIN, mark *in what different ways men are led to Jesus.* When Andrew and the other disciples followed Jesus, they did so because of the Baptist's word. Their days of companionship with John had made them ready to enter into the fellowship of Christ. Now John

was the last and the greatest of the prophets; he closes and embodies the spirit of the Old Testament. These two, then, were the first of those many thousands who have been led *through psalm and prophecy* to Christ. Then follows Peter, and his was a different avenue. It was a brother who brought him to the Lord. So Peter is the first of that great company who have been brought to Christ by the influence of *home*. But it was not even a brother that brought Philip. It was the *voice* of Jesus saying, Follow Me. Philip is the leader of all who have yielded obedience because they have heard the Master calling them. Last comes Nathanael, and Philip brings Nathanael. There was old intimacy between the two. Nathanael is a type of every one who is brought in by the influence of a *friend*. Do you note the diverse roads into Christ's presence? There are a thousand paths converging to that spot. They used to say that all roads led to Rome; perhaps it is truer that all roads lead to Christ. One highway rolls along through psalm and prophecy; another is built on the prayer and the peace of home. One path would not be known save for the Shepherd's voice, and another lies through the meadowland of friendship. Of all these, we have God's foreshadowing in the coming of the first disciples.

A GAIN, remark *by what different methods Jesus deals with new comers*. We can never note too earnestly or gratefully the value, in the eyes of Christ, of *one*. It was for one coin the woman swept the house. It was for one sheep the shepherd went a-seeking. It was for one son the father watched and prayed. Christ preached to vast audiences on many occasions, and a great crowd moved Him to compassion; but the woman of Samaria did not get poorer teaching because she formed an audience of one. The same thing strikes us in Jesus' dealing with new comers. They are not dealt with on any scale of ten. Each stands apart, and has a

separate treatment, for each was precious in the eyes of Christ. One new comer has his motives searched and sifted—that is the meaning of the sharp ‘What seek ye?’ (v. 38). Another is convinced that he is known—‘Behold an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile’ (v. 47). While a third is summoned and strengthened by a word of command, ‘Follow Me’ (v. 43). Let us not dream, then, that the Lord’s way with us will be the same as His way with other people. Let us not despise our own peculiar welcome because no one else had ever quite the same. He knows us separately; separately He loves us; and every new comer has his separate dealing.

LASTLY, *the Kingdom begins in personal acquaintance.* You know how *other* societies are formed? They are formed by the drawing up of rules and statutes; and men are solemnly enrolled as officers, and everything is formal and exact. Here only, in quiet and simple ways, a kingdom (though not of earth) is being founded, and it begins in acquaintance with the King. As it began so has it continued. The mark of citizenship is personal knowledge still. Strangers and aliens may say, ‘I know *about* Him.’ But the true citizen can say, ‘I know Him.’

EIGHTH SUNDAY

Morning

ABRAHAM AND SODOM

Passages to be read : Gen. xviii. 1-8, 23-33.

WE now reach one of the most familiar of all the scenes of the life of Abraham. We stand on the threshold of the doom of Sodom. Three figures approach Abraham as he rests in the noonday heat ; with characteristic readiness he gives them a hearty welcome ; and when everything has been made ready for their entertainment, and when the patriarch's love to God has been witnessed by his love to the brethren, there are words spoken, of such heavenly hope and cheer, as might well repay the richest hospitality. But often, in the experience of human life, the brightest and the darkest meet together ; often where the garden is exquisitely beautiful, the place is found where the cross must be erected ; and so it proved with Abraham in this memorable hour. The doom of Sodom follows hard upon the promise. The tragic fate of the cities of the plain forms part of that same embassy that was so full of hope. And the lesson that had opened with an angel's message, and with an assurance of a glorious future, closes in flight and misery and death.

FIRST note then *how God meets us in our usual station.* Abraham sat in his tent-door in the heat of the day. It was the hour of sultry noon and everything was drowsy, and Abraham rested in the shadow of his tent. It was

his customary place at this relaxing hour; he had been there yesterday, he would be there to-morrow; and it was in that familiar and unromantic spot, with the common sounds of tent-life in his ears, that the angels of the Almighty came to him. Let us learn, then, that the messengers of God are not reserved for our heroic moments. It is not only in our greater hours that the best is sent to us by the Eternal. Under the shadow of the house we dwell in, and amid the voices and the songs of home, where we catch the rustle of familiar garments, and hear the light footfall of the friends we love, *there* God will send to us His choicest ministers, as He sent them to Abraham in the tent-door at Mamre. Note, too, the time of day when they drew near. Could the children form a Bible-clock for heavenly visitors? It was very early in the morning, in the garden, that Mary Magdalene saw the risen Christ. It was late at night, in the season of deep sleep, that Daniel had his vision of Jehovah. It was in the cool of the day that the Lord walked in Eden. It was in the heat of the day that the angels came to Abraham.

NEXT note *how the messengers of God disguise themselves*. There is a noble picture by Doré, in his Doré Bible, which shows us these three figures at the tent; Doré has given them wings, clothed them in light, and decked them out with true angelic radiance. But no such radiance was visible to Abraham; it was not three angels he saw, it was three men; it was just because they were tired and dusty wayfarers that his hospitable and generous heart was touched. Whence had they come and whither were they going? Abraham knew not, and did not choose to ask. It was enough for him—a stranger—that they were strangers, and so he entertained angels unawares. I think, then, that what God would have us learn is the usual disguise that angels wear. They do not come to us with snow-white pinions, they come to us

as common men or women. How many a boy has lived to say of his mother, 'She was the minister of God to me!' How often a friend or a brother or a sister is the messenger in the heat of the day to us! Mr. Spurgeon, in one of his letters, wrote of his wife, 'She has been as an angel of God to me.' It is in that disguise God oftenest sends His angels. It is in the ministries of human love and helpfulness. They wear the garb of ordinary mortals, but they shall make life different to us for evermore. For it is not in any gleaming of white wings that the true mark of the angel-nature must be looked for; it is in swift obedience to the will of God, it is in making audible His voice, it is in making visible the love and joy and purity which are the life of all who live around the throne.

LASTLY, mark *how the wicked may be indebted to the good*. Sodom and Gomorrah came to a tragic end; all unexpectedly their doom was hurled upon them. How little the men of Sodom ever dreamed that Abraham had been praying and pleading for them. But the point we can never meditate upon too deeply is the condition on which God would have saved the city. The doom would be revoked, said the Almighty, if ten righteous men were found in Sodom. Now, think for a moment of the wonder of that. Think of the power of these ten good men. Sodom was plunged in all kinds of bestial wickedness, yet ten good men would have saved it from its doom. There was not a child who played in Sodom's alleys, there was not a merchant in any of Sodom's bazaars, there was not a mother who crooned to her loved babe, not a bride, not a bridegroom, not an old man, in Sodom, but would have escaped the hour of desolation, for the sake of ten good men within the city walls. Do you see, then, the far-reaching effects of righteousness? Do you note the blessings that may come to others through it? The scoffer and the jeerer and the mocker

may be more indebted to God's children than they know. And certain it is that if we are true to God, and strive to do His will in all humility, we shall convey some blessing to the lives of others, and perhaps be used to avert impending ruin, though of all this we may never hear a whisper, till we wake in the love and light of Abraham's God.

EIGHTH SUNDAY

Evening

THE MIRACLE AT CANA

Passage to be read : John ii. 1-11.

WHEN a man has set his hand to some stupendous task that can only be achieved through years of suffering, there are two seasons when the strain is sorest. One is when the great work is but begun, and the difficulties of it are coming into view; the other is when the work is well nigh ended. At these two times, when the strain is most intense, the heart recoils from the common intercourse of life. It is very notable that at these two periods we should find Jesus seated and happy at a feast. When other men are fevered, He is feasting. When others cannot brook the common talk, He joins the converse of the happy board. Could you have guessed, seeing that quiet stranger at the table, that but a week before, alone and in the wilderness, He had been tempted so fiercely by the devil? Could you have thought, seeing Him at the Last Supper with His own, that in a few days He would be crucified? The marriage feast at Cana, and the closing banquet in the upper chamber, not only tell us of His great love for men, they fill us with ever-deepening surprise at the wonderful serenity of Christ.

FIRST, then, let us observe that *in this first miracle we have a counterpart to the first temptation*. In the difference between Jesus' action then and now we have the first glimpses of His glory (v. 11). Alone in the wilderness there came the whisper, 'There is no bread; command that these stones be made bread.' Now at the marriage feast there comes the whisper, 'There is no wine,' and Jesus turned the water into wine. Both acts would have called for equal power; they were identical if regarded outwardly, yet Jesus saw in the former a snare of evil, and by the latter He began to show His glory. Do you see the difference between the two? In the one, His power would have been employed upon Himself; in the other, it was at the service of His friends. He turned the water into wine for others; but for Himself He would not turn the stones to bread. He saved others, Himself He would not save. He came not to be ministered unto, but to minister. It was the golden dawn of a self-forgetful service that won its crown on Calvary.

AGAIN, *in this first miracle we have the first foreshadowing of the surpassing excellence of Jesus' handiwork*. The home at Cana was a humble home; but at a marriage, an Oriental home, however humble, found ways and means to have the choicest wine. It was its very excellence which proved fatal to it—had it been worse, it might have lasted longer. Then Jesus wrought, and the six waterpots of water became wine, and when the chairman tasted it, not knowing whence it came, he cried that this was the best wine of all. When the company sat down there was wine upon the table. Christ's vintage challenged comparison with that. No wine could match the quality of that wine which was introduced into the feast by Christ. Now, is not that a mystical foreshadowing of the abiding glory of the Lord? Are there not many things which Jesus brought

to the world, the same in *kind* as the world had always had, yet overtopping them all in worth and excellence? I see the table of the world when Jesus came. There is the cup of love on it, and the beaker of joy; there is the wine of hope, and of peace, and of human character. But when I compare the hope and love and joy that Jesus *found*, with the hope and love and joy that Jesus *gave*; and when I place the highest pagan character with the noblest character that Christ has fashioned, I cry with the chairman, 'This is the best of all'—no wine can match the wine of Christ in quality.

ONCE more, *in this first miracle we have a first glimpse of the divine prodigality of love.* Did you ever think how much these waterpots contained, when the servants had filled them, perhaps in quiet humour, to the brim? They held about a hundred and twenty gallons. One twentieth part of that would surely have been ample to satisfy the largest marriage-company. But I hardly think that Jesus stopped to count whether the waterpots were six or twelve. Had He consulted His mother or the servants, they could have told Him exactly what was needed; but He consulted none but His own heart and God—and all the six are wine. Now turn to the wilderness again, and to the first temptation. *There*, for Himself, Jesus would not turn one single stone into a loaf. *Here*, in the service of His neighbour, there is no bounty that can be too great. He gives with a lavishness that is sublime, because it is the lavishness of love. Do you not think that as John looked back on this, he saw in the prodigality Christ's glory? I think he would recall this opening scene at Cana when the whisper went round, 'To what purpose is this waste?' It was Christ's glory to lavish His all upon the world. It was His glory to die upon the cross. In the uncalculating lavishness of dying love, John saw the spirit that had made the water wine.

LASTLY, *in this first miracle we have the first prophecy of the upward trend of Jesus' touch.* There have been men who have degraded all they touched. There have been men who never entered the circle of a home, or of a church, or of another's heart, but they have left it a little lower than they found it. But there are other men whose faces shine although they wist it not, and it is easier to be brave while they are with us, and we shall walk till the evening with a firmer tread because we met with them in life's golden morning. Now, magnified ten-thousandfold, that was and is the way with Jesus Christ. There is an upward trend in all His influence: He touches nothing that is not adorned. The lilies of the field speak loud of God; the mustard-seed is the likeness of the kingdom. Shifty Simon becomes stable Peter, and John the passionate grows into John who loves. The water becomes wine; the wine shall yet be the symbol of His blood. Have we all shared in this upward trend of Jesus' touch?

NINTH SUNDAY

Morning

HAGAR AND ISHMAEL

Passage to be read : Gen. xxi. 1-21.

AT last the promise was fulfilled, and a child was born to Sarah and to Abraham. God had delayed for years to make good His word, but even a thousand years with Him are as one day. The name which Abraham gave to his child was Isaac, and the word Isaac means literally *he shall laugh*—no doubt the little stranger in the tent was an adept in the art which his name hinted at. But the name had a deeper significance than that ; it would ever recall to Abraham Sarah's laughter ; it would ever remind him of the smiling incredulity with which the promise of God had been received ; and so, amid all the happiness that Isaac brought, and the brightness and joy with which he filled the tent, the name would suggest many a humbling thought on the mysteries of the providence of God. Shakespeare has taught us to say, 'What's in a name?' but there is a great deal, sometimes, in a name. When Simon was christened Peter by the Lord, it was a day of happiest augury for him. So, too, the new names which in heaven we shall receive, and which shall be a secret to all save their possessor, shall probably (like *Isaac*) so summarise the past, that the bearers alone shall feel their exquisite fitness.

ISAAC was born, then, and in due time was weaned, and on the day of his weaning a great feast was made. The child might be about two years old then, for such was the custom of these early days. Now Ishmael was about sixteen at the time, and it was all intensely ridiculous to Ishmael—it seemed so absurd, to a lad of sixteen years, that all this fuss should be made about a baby. Probably he was at little pains to hide his feelings—at sixteen we have not learned that art—and Sarah, whose heart had been growing very sore at Ishmael, determined to be rid of this vexatious boy. It was a season of much bitterness for Abraham. He was in a strait betwixt two, and knew not how to act; till God in His mercy cleared up his way for him, and authorised him to send Ishmael forth. So, early in the morning, Hagar and Ishmael went, taking the road that might lead to Hagar's home; but soon the lad is exhausted with fatigue, and Hagar, in agony, lays him down to die. Then follows the opening of Hagar's eyes, the saving of Ishmael, and his life in the desert; and so, with the sunshine of God upon the cloud, this beautiful and familiar lesson closes.

NOTE first, then, *how the fulfilment of God's promise may bring trouble*. An heir has been promised to Abraham long ago; he had lived and fought and suffered in the hope of it; he must have dreamed that his cup of joy would be full, in the hour when God gave fulfilment to His word. *Now* Abraham's hopes were crowned, for Isaac was there; all he had prayed and wished for had been granted; yet every glimpse we get into his tent shows us how Abraham's troubles had increased. The presence of Hagar was intolerable now; the strapping Ishmael was a perpetual irritation; life had been bearable till Isaac came, now it was clear that something must be done; so into the tent of Abraham came great grief (v. 11), and it came because God's promise was

fulfilled. There is a sense in which that is always true—does not Paul tell us these things are an allegory? (Gal. iv. 24). It is when God's promise in Jesus is fulfilled that the sinful past arises to distress us. Habits that once we tolerated now become intolerable; actions that neither worried us nor vexed us are now performed with a protesting conscience; nor is there any peace for a man's heart, that has been touched by the promise-keeping God, till such habits and actions are ruthlessly expelled, as were Hagar and Ishmael from the tent of Abraham.

NEXT note *how there may be hidden blessing in hardship*. It seems at first sight a very cruel thing that Ishmael should have been so suddenly ejected. For sixteen years he had lived among many comforts; henceforward he was to be an outcast. How Hagar's heart must have rankled in her breast as she quitted the tent with the boy she loved so dearly! How many a dream-fabric must have fallen, when she was told she was to be expelled! Yet the expulsion was the making of Ishmael, and through the hardship he was coming to his own. Ishmael would never have thriven in Abraham's tent; he was made for a freer, a wilder, a more reckless life. There was something in the desert, with its vast expanses, that was very congenial to Ishmael's spirit. So in the hour when fate seemed sorest to him, he was being led to the sphere that suited him; there was a hidden blessing in his hardship. Let us remember that, when the worst comes to the worst. We may be driven out, to find the ways of God. It was hard for Joseph to be carried down to Egypt; it was hard for Ishmael to be sent away; but the will of a directing God was in it, and under the harsh experience, was love.

LASTLY, note *how much we may miss till God opens our eyes*. When Ishmael was like to die out in the wilderness, Hagar was powerless, for the water-skin was

empty. A cupful of water would have saved the lad, yet she could spy no water in that parched and weary ground. Then God, hearing the cry of Ishmael (v. 17), opened her eyes, and lo! within a stonecast of her was a well. All that she craved for was at her very hand, but till God unlocked her eyes she saw it not. Is not that also (as Paul would say) an allegory? Is not that true of others besides Hagar? Are there none who may read this little article, who are craving for spiritual peace and power and victory? Remember that such blessings are not far away; like Hagar's well, they are within our reach; when our eyes are open we find that all we longed for is nearer to us than we had ever dreamed.

NINTH SUNDAY

Evening

THE WOMAN OF SAMARIA

Passage to be read: John iv. 1-30

IT is remarkable how many of the choicest scenes of Scripture should be associated with *wells*. It was by a well that Abraham's servant met with the destined bride of Isaac, in that loveliest story of the Book of Genesis. It was by the well that Jacob first cast his eyes on Rachel. It was at a well that one of the crises in the life of Moses came, when he stood up and rescued the daughters of Reuel from the shepherds. And all the memories and meetings of these Oriental wells are crowned by this story of the woman of Samaria. It was the hour of sultry noon, and the whole land was weary, and in the weariness of noonday Jesus shared. And then a woman of Samaria came to draw, thinking, remembering, dreaming as she came, and all so busy with her woman's heart

that she hardly spied the dusty traveller till He spake. So do we stumble on life's greatest moments. So coming to the well a thousand times unaltered, we come one day and everything is changed. Life's crises often come unheralded. God is not pledged to warn of their approach. They wear the garments of the common hours, and come in the multitude of common duties, when lo! we are at the parting of the ways, and all things shall be different for ever.

NOW what struck the writer of this story first was *the disregard that Jesus showed for the most cherished prejudices of His day*. Christ was a Jew after the flesh, and the woman with the pitcher was Samaritan, and for long centuries, and notably since the rebuilding of the Temple, Jew and Samaritan had been so ripening in mutual spite, that now they would not speak to one another. But Jesus sweeps these prejudices off. He bids defiance to conventionality. Behind the sinner, and back of the Samaritan, He hears the cry of a soul that can be saved. Everything else becomes as threads of gossamer before His burning passion to redeem her. Now there are some men who scorn conventionalities just because they want to seem original. But there are other men so filled with a burning purpose, that in the heat of it common prejudices die. That is a right noble disregard, it is the disregard of Jesus by the well.

IT is remarkable that *the first words of Christ are an appeal*. 'Give me to drink,' He said. It was the first time in all her life that she had ever been asked a favour by a Jew, and to be asked a favour by those whom we were certain would despise us, produces a strange revulsion in the heart. I do not know if even on the cross the humility of Christ is more apparent than in these humble pleadings that fell on this Samaritan's ears, and still are calling to our hearts to-day. We, too, may

feel certain that Jesus will despise us. We may think ourselves very loathsome in His sight. Yet He is pleading with us as a brother pleads, and calling to us as a brother calls, and He is holding out His death to us, and offering us His pardon and His power. Nay, more, whenever we give a cup of water to a little one in Jesus' name, then like the woman of Samaria we are giving Christ to drink. And in every kindly deed we ever did, we are responding to this pleading of the Master. In every face of pain, every distorted limb, every moan and sigh, and all the sobbing of the helpless children, Christ still is saying, 'Give me to drink.' And we had better cease to worship Him as Lord, than fail to respond to such a pleading.

[NOTE, too, that what roused the compassion of Jesus for this woman was *her ignorance*. 'Ah! woman, if you only knew the gift of God: if you only knew who was speaking to you!' In Sychar the honest neighbours rather shunned this woman, not because she was ignorant, but because she knew too much. They hated her. They tattled of her. She was a bold and an unprincipled woman. Only Jesus in the whole wide world pitied her from the bottom of His heart. She was so ignorant for all she knew! She had so missed the prize for all her unhallowed grasping! O heart of Christ, so infinite in pity, teach us again the ignorance of passion, and make us pitiful to the men and women who have missed the mark, because they have not known God's gift of love!

SO Jesus gently deals with the Samaritan, reading her heart, and showing her what she was, and leading her upward from the well of Jacob to the well-springs that are found in Jacob's God. 'Whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst. But the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life.' Two features

of this promised gift arrest us. (a) The first is that he that drinketh of the living stream shall *never thirst again*. But do we not find the Psalmist saying, 'My soul is thirsting for the living God?' Is every longing of the soul satisfied for ever when we have tasted of the wells of God? Nay, God forbid. The more we drink of holiness, the more we thirst for it. The more we drink of purity, the more we crave it. The more we taste of God, the more we long for Him. But under the power of this new affection, sinful affections gradually die; and baser cravings that dominated once, sink slowly in this new-born life in God; until at last the very craving is forgotten, and having tasted God we thirst no more. (b) And then this fountain is *within our heart*. This poor Samaritan had to take her pitcher, and run the gauntlet of the village street, whenever she wanted a draught of Jacob's well. But the gladness and the peace are within us, when we have truly met with Jesus Christ. There is a sense in which a Christian is dependent. There is another sense in which a Christian is the most independent man alive. He can go singing under the dullest skies, he can have royal fellowship in crowded streets, for he carries his heaven in his heart, and heaven in the heart is heaven on earth.

TENTH SUNDAY

Morning

THE OFFERING OF ISAAC

Passage to be read : Gen. xxii. 1-19.

FEW scenes, in the whole compass of the Bible, are more familiar than the sacrifice of Isaac. We knew the charm of it when we were children, and as we recur to it, time and again, amid the deepening experience of the years, we find that the story has not lost the power and beauty that so arrested us in bygone days. This indeed is one of the wonders of God's Word, that we never leave it behind us as we travel. With all our growth through activity and sorrow, it grows in richness of interpretation. There are books which we very speedily outstrip ; we read them, and we lay them aside for a period, and then we come back to them and find them thin and inadequate. But with all our growth, the Bible seems to grow ; coming back to it we do not find it empty ; rather with the increasing knowledge of the years, and the crosses and burdens they inevitably bring, new depths of divine help and wisdom open themselves before us in God's Word. It is peculiarly so with such a passage as this. We can never exhaust its spiritual significance. To our childish ears it is a delightful story ; it appeals as powerfully as any fairy-tale ; but gradually we come to see beneath the surface, and to discern the mind of God within the picture, until at last we reach the sweet assurance that underneath are the everlasting arms.

NOTE first then how *the words of God may seem to contradict each other*. Isaac was the child of promise; the hopes of Abraham were crowned in him; it had been revealed to Abraham by God that in Isaac should his seed be called. Clearly, then, it was the will of God that Isaac should grow to manhood, and should rear a family; yet here comes the command of God to Abraham to offer up his boy as a burnt-offering. Did Abraham stay to argue out the matter? Did he charge God with this seeming contradiction? Nay, but without a single word of murmur he started to execute the will of Heaven; and we know now that through his instant action all seeming contradiction passed away. We are all of us in a like plight to Abraham—the voices we hear are so often contradictory. The duties we are called to often seem to clash; the tasks that are set us are apparently incompatible. Let us learn that our true course is that of Abraham, to go instantly forward in the track of present duty. How was it possible that Isaac should have heirs, and yet should be slain as a lad upon the altar? Had Abraham sat down to puzzle out the matter, it would have been confusion worse confounded. But he did not sit down, he rose up very early; he did exactly what God bade him do; and so for him, as for us, along the line of duty, the apparent antagonism was resolved.

NOTE again that *we are educated by temptation*. This was an hour of testing for the patriarch; it was an hour of sore strain upon his faith; no greater demand could be made on him by Heaven than to sacrifice this lad he loved so well. But it was not merely a season of sharp testing, it was a time of the mightiest educative influence; it gave to Abraham such new conceptions of sacrifice as have left their impress on all history. There was not a chieftain in the country where Abraham dwelt but was familiar with the rites of human sacrifice. Many a time, as he sat by his tent door, Abraham had spied

the fires of such an offering. And I doubt not that he had meditated on the matter, and marvelled at the religious enthusiasm it denoted, and fallen a-wondering whether some gift like that might not be acceptable also to *his* God. Then came the commandment from Heaven about Isaac, and the altar on Mount Moriah, and the ram; and Abraham learned that the surrender of a life was a different thing in God's sight from the ending of it. He was taught that it is not the outpouring of the blood, it is the obedient spirit that gives the worth to sacrifice. He saw that God may claim all that is ours, and yet may claim it not for destruction, but for fuller life. So was he educated to larger and purer thoughts, not by any sweet and silent meditation, but by the testing of this mountain-hour. Are we not all educated in kindred ways? Sooner or later does not God call us from our ease, and send us (like Abraham) to a highland school? For it is not only by the thoughts we think that we arrive at the clearest and the happiest views of God; it is by temptation, it is through trial and testing, it is by obedience to the sterner call, and by patience in the bearing of the cross.

OBSERVE, too, *the secrets that separate us as we journey*. As Abraham went up the hill with Isaac, his fatherly heart would yearn over his son. And the high spirits of the lad, and his merry laugh, and the glad speech of his unsuspecting innocence, all this would stab Abraham as deeply as Abraham's knife could ever stab his son. How closely and fondly were they knit together! How strong were the bonds of love between these lives! Yet what a world there was between them as they climbed, and what thoughts in the bosom of Abraham of which Isaac knew nothing! So does that far-off journey to the hills become a parable of the road we are all travelling, for we travel it in the closest of relationships, yet there is that in each heart that cannot

be made plain. Betwixt the nearest and dearest, as they breast life's slope together, there is much that cannot be voiced in human speech; a certain loneliness is quite inevitable, no matter how warm the love be that encircles. No doubt that will all pass away, when the summit level of the climb is reached. Then we shall know even as we are known. Meantime we must press heavenward in life's glad fellowship, as Abraham went with Isaac up the hill, nor murmur if there be that in us, and others, that can neither be conveyed nor understood.

LASTLY, note that *God makes provision in the nick of time*; it was so He furnished the ram for the burnt-offering. It was when Abraham's faith had been tested to the utmost, it was when Isaac's self-surrender was complete—it was *then* that in the thicket in the background Abraham discovered God's provided sacrifice. God gives, when all is ready for the giving. God gives when every preparation is complete. There is a fitting moment for every gift of God, and never before, nor after, is it sent. In that faith Abraham lived from this great hour. In that faith let us, too, face the morrow. It will keep us happy. It will make us restful. It will give us courage to endure, and peace to die.

TENTH SUNDAY

Evening

THE CURE OF THE NOBLEMAN'S SON

Passage to be read: John iv. 43-54.

IT is to be noted that all the miracles in this Gospel, with the exception of those of the Loaves and the Walking on the Sea, are found in this Gospel only. We know that if all the works which Jesus did were

written, the world itself could not contain the books thereof, and John was led to choose, for us, such deeds and such words of Jesus, as should embody great principles in themselves, and should not overlap the testimony of others. The life of Jesus is like the world we live in, there is room in it for the joyful use of all our gifts, and when we are rooted and grounded in love, as this apostle was, we shall have little heart to interfere with others. The last miracle that we considered was that of Cana—it was the beginning of the showing of His glory. *This* miracle is a beginning too—it is the beginning of the Galilean ministry. A thing well begun is half done, we say—note the noble beginnings of our Saviour's ministry. Observe, too, that our Lord began exactly as He meant to go on. I have known folk beginning with enthusiasm, but in a little while how listless and dull they grew! Remember that whether it be in work or play that is not the spirit of our Master. All through His life, and all through the after-centuries, our Lord has been turning the water into wine; He has never ceased to respond to the cry of faith, nor to be a healer of worse sicknesses than fever. It is no chance, then, that with such displays of power His glory and His Galilean ministry began.

SO Jesus was at Cana of Galilee again, and you can hardly wonder that the people received Him eagerly. You may depend upon it that the servants who had borne the waterpots, as they sat of an evening in the inn at Cana, would never weary of recounting what had happened when they had filled the vessels with water to the brim. The news of this mystery had travelled far; it had entered the doors of the palace of Herod Antipas; and some had wondered, and some had scoffed, and some had jestingly wished they had been there. But there was one courtier, or king's officer, at Herod's court, who pondered deeply on this so

marvellous story, and when rumours came of Jesus in Judæa, and of all He had done at Jerusalem during feast-time (v. 45), he sifted them out, and dwelt on them in secret. Until at last, in the court of Herod Antipas (one of the unlikeliest places in the world), there was a heart that had begun to clamber upwards into the first glimmerings of faith. And then the son of this nobleman fell ill; physicians were useless, he was at the point of death. How vapid and vain was all the showy court-life, when there rang through it, in a voice he loved so well, the wild and delirious cries of raging fever! So oftentimes an illness may be used to tear away the tapestries around us, and to lead us from the chamber of our worldly hopes, into the presence of the living Christ. The nobleman came to Cana and we know what followed. If there is life in a look, there is life too in a word. The smoking flax was handled as only Christ could handle it, till the flame (of faith) in this strong heart burned clear. The incident took place at one o'clock; the courtier set out for Capernaum immediately. The sun set, and a new day began, for with the Jew the day begins at sunset. And then his servants met him with faces of such radiance that the father had not to ask what was their news; and 'Yesterday' they said (or as we should say 'To-day'), 'at one o'clock the fever left him.' That was an hour (to use the words of Jesus) when Capernaum was exalted unto heaven. In one of its homes, at any rate, that evening, there was a very heaven of joy and love and gratitude. It was the second miracle which Jesus did in Galilee, and it also was a turning of water into wine.

NOTE first, then, as springing from this matchless story, *how we may neglect the evidence of quiet years.* 'Except ye see signs and wonders,' said Jesus to the courtier, and as He spoke He would turn to the people also—'Except ye see signs and wonders, ye will not

believe.' Now what, think you, did Jesus mean by that? I think He meant something of this kind. 'I was among you,' He meant, 'during my years of childhood, I spent my opening and my ripening manhood here; and I was the same then as I am to-day, had you only had spiritual eyes to recognise Me; but you would not receive Me, I had no honour among you, till I went to Judæa and wrought these mighty deeds, and now (though I am the same yesterday and to-day) you welcome Me gladly for the signs and wonders.' Let us learn then to have an open eye in the years when God is moving among us quietly. Let us not wait for occurrences that startle, ere we give a welcome to the Light of men. In the countless providences of the common week, in the texts we read in the quiet of eventide, in the hymns we sing, in the preaching we hear, in all God's daily love and kindness to us, there is a call to every one of us, 'My son, give Me thine heart.'

THEN note, as signally illustrated here, *how true faith is followed by activity*. It was a journey of faith from Capernaum to Cana, it was not less so from Cana to Capernaum. All the love in the world for the poor boy would never have led the father Cana-wards, unless within him there had been some spark of faith in the power and willingness of Jesus. Remember then that when a faith is real, working by love it will go forth in action. Remember too that there is no such source of action, nor anything so sure to make it high and noble, as an underlying faith in God's dear Son. It matters not what the children are going to be—sailors, soldiers, teachers, mechanics, nurses—whatever it is, they will do it all the more worthily, with purer motives, with more victorious gladness, if they begin life with the prayer of him who cried, 'Lord, I believe; help Thou mine unbelief.'

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ELEVENTH SUNDAY

Morning

REBEKAH AND ISAAC

Passage to be read : Gen. xxiv. 10-28, 58-67.

THREE years have passed since the death of Sarah, and now we come to a very different scene. Through heart-breaking sorrows and through God-given joys the course of human life rolls onward; and in the Bible story, as in our own experience, there is the chequering of light and shadow. Abraham is a very old man now; he has fought his fight well, and he has kept the faith; but there is still one matter that weighs heavily upon him, in a way which we of the West can hardly understand. With *us*, when a young man wishes to get married, he himself takes the initiative. He would never think of letting the matter be settled for him, even by the most affectionate of fathers. But in the East, and especially in early times, parental control was very wide in its reach, and a son's marriage (like his education now) was one of the cares and duties of the father. This was the matter that was weighing upon Abraham. Isaac was forty years of age now, and unmarried. If the promise was to be fulfilled in Isaac's line, had not the hour come when Isaac should be wed? It was this conviction which determined Abraham to take the steps recorded in our chapter.

NOW it reveals the intensity of Abraham's faith that in this matter he should have acted so. He was determined that, at whatever cost, he would have a wife

for his son from his own kindred. Around him there were wealthy and powerful chiefs, into whose families Isaac would have been welcomed. Powerful alliances might have been cemented, that would have enormously strengthened Abraham's position. But all such worldly trafficking Abraham scorned; it was not in such ways Canaan must be won; Abraham had looked to God in twenty choices, and now he would trust Him in choosing Isaac's bride. So Eliezer, his head-servant, set out. It seemed on the face of it a wild-goose chase. Was it likely that any of the maidens of Haran would leave their homes to venture on such a journey? Eliezer had many such thoughts within his heart. But he did his duty, and we know how he prospered, till that hour at eventide when Isaac was in the fields; nor can we doubt that this brave and noble woman, so quick to decide and so prompt to act, was exquisitely fitted to be the bride of quiet and patient and meditative Isaac.

FIRST note, then, *what loyal service was rendered by Eliezer*. It was a strange errand on which he was sent away. To the eye of sense it seemed to be doomed to failure. Yet he threw himself into it with all his heart, and carried it through with consummate tact and wisdom. When he was taken into Laban's house, and when the camels had been tended, and the foot-washing was over, there was meat set before him, but not a bite would he touch, till he had told the errand that brought him to Haran (v. 33). Right through the journey you can detect the servant at every cost putting his master first. And right through the journey, in the heart of all the service, you light on fervent prayer to Abraham's God. Is not that a type of what *our* service should be? Does not Eliezer put some of us to shame? Are we as patient and as tactful and as prayerful in all we strive to do for our great Master? When our hopes of successful labour grow remote; when the claims of self seek to assert

themselves; when in the stress and anxiety of work we find ourselves forgetting supplication, it is never lost time to open Genesis, and travel to Haran in Eliezer's company.

NOTE next *how our casual meetings are arranged by God*. When the Samaritan woman came to Jacob's well, and found a stranger sitting by it, weary, it seemed to her to be a casual meeting; yet all the world knows now how God had ordered it. So here Rebekah came to draw at eventide, and by chance (as she thought) there was a stranger there; yet we know what prayers in the far-off tent of Abraham, and what earnest petitions from Eliezer's lips, were being answered as Rebekah came to draw. The meeting was not casual after all; behind it was many a cry of fervent prayer; and may we not say that in every human life there are hours, like this one, that seem quite meaningless, and yet behind them, could we but pierce the gloom, there is the moving of the hand of God. We must be very wakeful in our common days. We must remember the background of the most casual meeting. *In minimis Deus maximus*, says the wise apophthegm: in the least things God is greatest.

NOTE, lastly, *how far-reaching may be the consequences of one kindness*. It was very kindly and gracious of Rebekah to draw water for Eliezer's camels. Travelers, who are loud in praise of Oriental kindness, tell us that that favour is scarcely ever rendered. Now Rebekah had no ulterior motives in her action, she was but following the dictates of her own generous heart; yet the consequences of that one act were quite incalculable; had it never been done, she had never been Isaac's bride. Is not that a hint of the far-reaching power of every kindly deed we try to do? Does it not teach us that in ways we cannot estimate, the generous

deed we do shall have its harvest? It is not always easy to be kind. We may be worried, or tired, or burdened with some cross. But for Rebekah, the road to joy and glory began in a kindly and hospitable deed, and who can tell what may not open for us, if, like her, we begin by helping somebody?

ELEVENTH SUNDAY

Evening

THE CALL OF THE FISHERMEN

Passage to be read: Luke v. 1-11.

IT was not easy for Jesus Christ to be alone, men were so eager and so curious about Him. Not only did they crowd round Him in the villages, where at any moment there might be a work of healing, but they also watched Him as He stole away into retirement, among the hills, or by the seashore. Our lesson opens, then, with Jesus at the seaside, and there, as in Capernaum, there is a great crowd round Him, eager to listen to the Word of God. Then Jesus steps into one of the fishing-boats and preaches there—note the many and strange pulpits in which Christ preached. And when the sermon was over, and Jesus was doubtless weary—what did He do? did He ask for a drink of water? He immediately turned to Peter, in whose boat He was, and said to him, ‘Launch out into the deep.’ He had seen the disappointed look in Peter’s face. He had detected that the night’s fishing was a failure. All the excitement of the thronging crowd, and all the effort of telling them God’s news, had not made Him careless of one man’s disappointment. So may we learn to trust Christ’s individual care, though we be

only atoms in a countless multitude. Then follows the miracle, and the call to discipleship, and so this brief but exquisite lesson closes.

NOW, note that *it was in deep waters that the draught was got.* The first word of Jesus was, 'Launch out into the deep.' If the nets were to be filled with fish that morning, the first requirement was to leave the shallows. Now, every miracle is but an acted parable; there are meanings in it that all life may interpret, and to us to-day, no less than to Simon Peter, Jesus is saying, 'Launch out into the deep.' We must come right out for God if we are ever to enjoy Him. We must unfasten the cable that binds us to the shore. It is when we launch out into the deeps of trust, that we find how mysteriously the nets are filling. For the harvest of life's sea is joy and peace, and growing insight, and increasing love, and these are beyond the reach of every fisherman, save of him who dares to launch into the deep. Then, too, as experience increases, we learn the meaning of the expression 'deep waters.' We learn that sorrow and care, and suffering and loss are the deep waters of the human heart. And when we find what a harvest these may bring, and how men may be blessed and purified and made unworldly by them, we understand the need of the deep waters, if the nets are ever to be filled.

NOTE again that *God's gifts may cause some disorder at the first.* When Peter at Christ's command let down the net, it enclosed a great multitude of fishes. We may be sure that the net was a good one if it was Peter's making, yet for all its goodness it began to break. Now nets are very precious to a fisherman; the loss of them is sometimes irreparable. So in a moment we see Peter and Andrew beckoning to their neighbours' boat, and like the man of Macedonia, crying, 'Come

over and help us.' They came at once, and both of the boats were filled, and filled so full that they began to sink. And the point I wish you to note is that the first results of the kindness of the Saviour were—breaking nets and sinking ships! You see, then, that when Jesus enters a life (as He entered Andrew's and Simon's boat that morning), it is always possible that at the first there may be some distress and confusion and disorder. We find abundant records of it in the early Church, and every minister has seen it in his converts. Let no one be distressed, then, if when Christ steps on board it is not all joy and singing from the start. All that will come, in the good time of God, for the promise is there shall be no more sea. Meantime, just because Christ is good, and changes the empty night into such morning fulness, the nets (that are so precious to us) may seem on the point of breaking, and the waves come lapping to the gunwale of the ship.

ONCE more, *it is the nearness of Jesus that shows us our unworthiness.* One day, when Jesus was across the lake in Gadara, the Gadarenes came to Him with a strange petition: they came and begged Him to depart out of their coasts. Jesus had cured the Gadarene demoniac; He had interfered with the local trade of swine-keeping; and so incensed were the people at this interference, and so dead were they to the glory of their Visitor, that they begged Him to depart, and He departed. How different is the cry of Peter here, 'Depart from me, O Lord, for I am a sinful man.' It was not because he was dead in trespasses and sins, it was because he was wakened to his own unworthiness, that Peter was overpowered by the Lord's presence. And so, while Jesus departed from the Gadarenes, the next word that He spoke to Peter was 'Fear not' (v. 10). Sometimes, when we gather a bunch of flowers, they seem to us very sweet and beautiful; and so they may

be, for they are God's creatures, and He has made everything beautiful in its time. But if we take a pure white rose and set it in the midst of them, it is strange how garish and coarse some of the others appear. They are God's creatures, but they seem less worthy now, in the near presence of that pure and perfect whiteness. Just so when Jesus Christ is far away, we may be very well contented with ourselves. But when He enters our boat, and shows us His love and power, like Peter—'I am a sinful man.'

THEN, lastly, *these men followed Christ when things were brightest with them.* They had never had such a fishing in their lives. It was not in the weary morning after a useless night that they forsook all and followed Jesus. It was when they were the envy of the neighbourhood for the huge haul of fishes they had got. Will the children act as Simon and Andrew acted? Will they follow Jesus when life is at its brightest? It is better to come late than not at all. It is better to come in old age than to die Christless. But it is best to come when all the nets are full, when life is golden, and the heart is young; *best*, and not only best, but *surest*, for 'they that seek Me early, shall find Me.'

TWELFTH SUNDAY

Morning

JACOB AND ESAU

Passages to be read : Gen. xxv. 27-34 ; xxvii. 18-38.

REBEKAH had twin sons, Esau and Jacob, and to-day we study two scenes in the life of these sons—scenes which reveal their characters most clearly. It is often a wonder to us how, in one family circle, there should be children of quite opposite dispositions, and I dare say the neighbours often felt a similar wonder as they watched the two lads who were growing up in Isaac's tent. The one was bold, impetuous, and daring ; fond of the open, a very skilful hunter ; there was nothing he loved better than to be off at daybreak with his bow on his shoulder and his arrows in his belt ; but the other was quiet and canny and (as the neighbours would say) deep as a well ; he had no love at all for feats of hardihood ; he never wearied of his own company, or of his mother's. We are not surprised that Esau was Isaac's favourite, for there is something that appeals to helpless age in gallant and adventurous youth ; nor can we wonder that Rebekah set her heart on Jacob, who was so thoughtful and so quiet at home. So these two lads grew up in the one tent, brothers, yet with a whole world of difference between them, and it is this difference which is so signally illustrated in the two incidents we have to study to-day. In the first, we have Esau parting with his birthright ; in the second, we have Isaac blessing Jacob. In both we have the child of the bow and of the

spear outmatched and outwitted by the stay-at-home. What lessons, then, may we learn from these two stories that are so faithfully and so simply told?

WELL, first, *it is not easy to be wise when we are hungry.*

When Esau started out hunting in the morning, he had little thought of what evening was to bring. His heart beat merrily and his brain was clear, and he saw things in their right proportions then. But when evening came he was utterly spent; he was physically exhausted and ravenous with hunger; and it was *then* that nothing he possessed seemed worthy of being compared with a dish of savoury food. So do we learn how dangerous it is to make any bargains when we are very tired. When we are physically worn with a day's toil we are not capable of judging rightly. A hungry man is an angry man, says the old proverb, and an angry man is not fit to transact business. May we not learn, too, to feel a deeper compassion for those who rarely have enough to eat? If they act foolishly and break the law, and play fast and loose with much that makes life noble, should not our hearts be very tender towards them, as they are towards Esau in his sorry bargain? I think that Jesus had all that in view when He laid the command on us to feed the hungry. For when we feed the hungry we not only satisfy the body, nor do we merely minister to a physical want. We make it easier to resist temptation; we help to restore the balance to the mind; we do something to keep men from these rash and reckless acts that, done in a moment, may ruin all the years.

PUT in another light this passage is meant to teach us *how prone we are to despise what cost us nothing.* Esau had not toiled and striven for his birthright. He had not won it by the work of his own hands. It was the dowry of God to him; the gift of heaven; it had

fallen on him by the will divine. May it not be then that just because of this, it had never seemed truly precious in Esau's eyes? And should we not all be alive to our constant peril, of forgetting God's gifts because they are freely given? It is the things that we toil for, which we prize; it is the things that have cost us weary hours to win. The fruit that has dropped into our lap from the laden branches is not nearly so sweet as the fruit we have climbed to get. So are we always in danger of despising many of the common (yet choicest) gifts of God, because they are given to us (as Esau's birthright was) out of a free and unearned and sovereign bounty. Was it by the toil of our own hands that our eye acquired its marvellous power of seeing? or our ear of hearing? or our brain of thinking? Was it *our* sacrifice that gave us our spiritual liberty? Was it *our* labour that reared our childhood's home? Such things as these may well be called our birthright; it is these that make life great and glorious for us; yet how often we despise them just as Esau did, because, like Esau's, they were so freely given!

A GAIN, this meets us in the second incident, *how we may be tempted most sorely by those who love us most*. No one would doubt Rebekah's love for Jacob. It was very deep and it was very brave. She was willing that all the curse should fall on her, if only the son she loved should get the blessing (xxvii. 13). Yet it was not any foe who tempted Jacob to win the blessing of Isaac by a trick; it was the mother who idolised her son, and who would have given her life for him, she loved him so. So do we see how the fieriest temptations may come from the side of those who love us best. It is when the voice that whispers is as a mother's voice that the onset of temptation is most terrible. It was hard for Christ to be tempted in the wilderness; perhaps it was harder still to be tempted by Simon Peter. It was the very love of

Simon Peter that made Jesus so swift and stern in His rebuke.

THEN, lastly, we cannot be blind to this, that *God's will is wrought out through human sin and error*. What sin there is in these two incidents! What deception and what shameful trickery! What striving there is to overreach; how each seems fighting for his own hand! Yet over the wildest storm on the deep sea the stars will sometimes look down in infinite calm; so here, above all the noise of passion, is the sure and unalterable will of God. Let us be glad that neither sin nor error can ever overturn the plan of God. *That vessel gets to its desired haven, however tempestuously the winds may blow*. It is through such strange episodes, preserved for us in Scripture, that faith is strengthened in a sovereign will; it is through them we learn to pray with new assurance, 'Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth.'

TWELFTH SUNDAY

Evening

JAIRUS'S DAUGHTER

Passage to be read : Luke viii. 41-56.

THE morning that saw the Gadarene demoniac cured dawned sadly over one home in Capernaum.

The sun rose up, the narrow streets became busy, one heard the word of command of the Roman officer drilling his garrison beside the fort (Luke vii. 1-10); but in one house in the Jewish quarter everything was hushed. Folk moved on tiptoe, they spoke in whispers; and in the little bedroom the father and mother knelt beside the bed. There lay their daughter—she was

twelve years old. They had been watching and praying by her bed all night. They had been hoping against hope, and fighting with their fears. But the autumn morning came, fresh, bright, and beautiful, and the strong light of it flooded the room and fell on the little sufferer's face—and hope was gone. No Jewish doctor was needed to confirm the worst. Their daughter was dying. Will my readers note that she was an *only* daughter? Do they remember how often *one* thing, *one* person, stands at the centre of Gospel scene or story? It was one coin the woman lost. It was one sheep the shepherd missed. The widow of Nain had but one son. Here the whole family was one daughter. Around the throne of God in heaven *thousands* of children stand; but—

'Thou art as much His care, as if beside
Nor man nor angel lived in heaven or earth.'

THE father's name was Jairus, and he was the leading elder in the Capernaum Church. He had heard Jesus reading the Scriptures there; he had often talked with neighbours whom Jesus had healed; he had seen a miracle with his own eyes. Everybody in Capernaum knew Jairus; but no one knew that he believed in Christ till his little daughter was at the point of death. *Then* he confessed it. He ran to the shore as the keel grated on the pebbles. He flung himself down at Jesus' feet. He implored Him to come and heal his daughter, and Jesus, in compassion, heard his prayer. What different impulses lead men to Christ! Yesterday on the loch the disciples had cried 'Master!' and it was *fear for themselves* that made them do it. And now the ruler of the synagogue cries 'Master!' and it was *love for his child* that made him do it. A little child had led him. Had Jairus's daughter always been strong and happy, she never would have helped her father so. Health is a precious gift. We thank God for the rosy cheeks in

wailed were wailing for a fee. They beat their breasts at so much per hour. Had their grief been genuine, Jesus had been very pitiful. But it was insincere, and He turned them out. Christ hates all shams. He cannot tolerate hypocrisy. He excludes from His company the insincere. See, too, the *unfailing thoughtfulness* of Jesus. It was He who commanded that the maid should have food. Jairus loved his daughter, and would have died for her. But in the joy of that hour he never noticed that she was hungry. Christ noticed what Jairus failed to see. And learn, lastly, that '*those that are called early are called easily.*' The maid was newly dead. She had not been lying in her grave, like Lazarus. So here there is no agony of spirit, no crying with a loud voice; but all is quietly and easily done. All spiritual awakening is the work of God, but the young are the most easily awakened. No grave-clothes bind them yet. No long-continued sins have made them loathsome. Let fathers and mothers realise their opportunity, and plead with God for definite conversions. Christ still is saying, 'Suffer the children to come unto Me.'

THIRTEENTH SUNDAY

Morning

JACOB'S VISION AT BETHEL

Passage to be read: Gen. xxviii. 10-22.

FEW places mentioned in Scripture are more rich in hallowed memories than Bethel. Time and again in the history of Israel we find it the scene of important or stirring deeds. But the incident which stands out from all the others, which has given the name of Bethel to a thousand sanctuaries, and which inspires our paraphrase 'O God of Bethel' with such depth of meaning, is the incident which forms our lesson for to-day. We all know what brought Jacob there. Esau was passionately angry at the trick that had been played upon him. There was no knowing what he might do in his fury (xxvii. 44). Some men, being insulted, show little sign of feeling, they bury their resentment and bide their time—such are the dangerous men. But other men flare up in fiery wrath, for a little season there is no reasoning with them, and of such a nature was Esau. It were well, then, that Jacob should be removed till the first heat of Esau's heart was cooled. There were other motives, too, connected with his marriage, that made the departure of Jacob a desirable thing. So Jacob, with many a prayer and many a tear—for he was still the idol of his mother's heart—was sent away from the tent, and came to Bethel.

IT is always a critical time when a young man leaves home, and this was Jacob's home-leaving. How soon all that we have been making of the years comes to the surface, for weal or woe! At home, we are sheltered by a father's care, and we are guarded by a mother's love; we scarcely know our perils and temptations while we are in that sweetest of all imprisonments. But the hour of liberty is sure to come, when in the providence of God we are cast on our resources, and it is then that we learn our weakness and our strength. This, then, was Jacob's home-leaving. We can picture the excitement of the man. He had never been a wanderer like Esau; he had loved the quiet shelter of the tent. Now he was entering unfamiliar scenes, and his mind was intensely alive to all impressions. Gradually, as he journeyed, the character of the country changed. The rolling pastures gave place to highland scenery. Until at last, just as the day was closing, Jacob found himself beneath a mountain-side, where slab was piled on slab, and rock rose up on rock, as if the whole were a ladder of the Almighty. Then the sun sank, and Jacob lay down to sleep. And he dreamed, and in his dream he still saw the ladder. It is often the last thing that has impressed us in our waking hours which shapes the tenor and substance of our dream. But the ladder was all transfigured now. It was bright as light, and it reached up to heaven, and up and down its glowing steps there moved the feet of the angel-host of heaven. More glorious still, at the top of it was God; in what shape or form we do not know. And as sometimes, down a mountain-side, there falls a stream with sweet and soothing music, so down the ladder came the sound of a voice, a voice that is 'as the sound of many waters.' What glorious words of promise the voice spoke, we know. Then Jacob awoke, and all things were unchanged—unchanged, yet everything was new to him. And he said, How dreadful is this place! This is none other but the house of God!

NOW what is the meaning of this heavenly dream? Well, first, remember that *Jacob was looking backward*. He realised, for the first time in his life, what it meant to be utterly alone. During the day he had not felt his loneliness, for the sunlight, and the stir of travel, and the meeting of merchants and travellers on the road, had helped to dissipate all vexing thoughts; but now in the 'dead vast and middle of the night' Jacob felt utterly alone. He thought of his aged father in the tent, and of his mother lying open-eyed in the darkness. She was thinking of him and praying for him and wondering where he was in that still hour. And every fresh thought of that love, now far away, intensified the isolation of Jacob. *Then* it was that Jacob had his dream. *Then* it was that God drew near to him. He learned in that never to be forgotten hour at Bethel that though alone, he was yet not alone. He was in touch with light and love and heaven. From the very stone where his head was couched that night there was free access to the feet of God. Was not that a turning-point in Jacob's history? Is it not always a crisis when we thus are found of God? We can never again be desolate and lonely, we can never think of the world as being tenantless. The places we live in and all the tasks we do are consecrated by the God of Jacob.

BUT Jacob was not only looking backwards, *he was looking forward too*. No one, in the hour of leaving home, can have all his heart centred in the past. What was before him, Jacob did not know. He seemed to himself to be an aimless wanderer. He was flying to escape his brother's anger, but what might come of it all he could not guess. Would he be home again after a week or two? Would it be years ere he saw the tent he loved? One thing only was clear to Jacob—that in the morning he must climb the mountain-side. So he lay

down to sleep, and lo! the ladder that led he knew not whither up the hill became a stair, all full of light and glory, that led up to the very feet of God. So Jacob learned, from the vision and the voice, that he was not in any sense an aimless wanderer. His feet were guided with unerring wisdom; his course was directed by un-failing love. God was his shepherd, and God would never leave him till He had done all He had spoken of (v. 15). What a great hour that was for Jacob! What a great hour it is for all of us, when we learn that we are not tossed like a leaf before the wind, but are moving forward on a path prepared.

[N closing, let us never forget *how Jesus used this scene*, nor how, in the ladder which Jacob saw, He found the type and figure of Himself. 'Hereafter ye shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man' (John i. 51). What does that mean? It means that through Jesus Christ we have access to God the Father. It means that the way to heaven, with all its angel-ministries, is the exercise of faith in the Son of Man. It means that if there is safety in lone places, and sweet society there, and light and love; if there is consecration of unlikeliest spots, and certain guidance for the unknown morrow, all this is won for us by our Mediator, who, though He was rich, yet for our sakes became poor.

THIRTEENTH SUNDAY

Evening

FEEDING THE FIVE THOUSAND

Passage to be read : Matt. xiv. 13-21.

THIS is the only miracle recorded in each of the four Gospels, and we must take that as a token of the profound impression which it made. To *us*, the raising of Lazarus is more astounding than this mountain feast ; but had we lived in Galilee, and heard the common talk, we should have perhaps found that this miracle was graven deepest on men's hearts. Most of the other miracles had been seen by few. There was no crowd near when the Nain widow got her son again. When Lazarus awoke, there were only the village neighbours present. But *here* five thousand lips had eaten, and five thousand lips would talk, until in every croft and cottage this miracle would be a household word. That deep impression is registered in the fourfold narrative.

ONLY a word is needed to describe the miracle. Partly to avoid the dangerous neighbourhood of Herod, and still more, to refresh his overstrained disciples—for there is nothing like a day with Christ among the hills for making a worried heart itself again—Jesus and His disciples cross the loch, and steer for the quiet hills by the north shore. Alas! there was to be little rest that day. The folk had seen them launching. They hurry round by the north end of the loch, meeting and mingling with the pilgrim-companies making for Jerusalem to keep the Passover. And as the prow of the boat grates on the beach, and Jesus and His disciples step ashore, God's great cathedral of the mountain-side,

whose roof is heaven and whose organ-music is the sea, is thronged with a vast and eager congregation. Then Jesus heals, and teaches, and in the evening feeds them. Which done, the stars come out, and the crowds are scattered, and the disciples are rowing homeward to Capernaum, and Jesus is on the mountain-side in prayer.

NOTE first that *this miracle had its roots in Christ's compassion*. When He stepped ashore and saw much people, we read that He was moved with compassion towards them. And all the healing, and teaching, and feeding of that memorable day sprang from that pity in the heart of Christ. And that is the glory of divine compassion—it is the source and spring of noble deeds. Often *we* pity where we cannot help. But the compassion of Jesus sprang into action always. It set Him healing, teaching, feeding hungry men, and it still draws Him to the same service. Is Christ my compassionate High-priest to-day? Then He will help me in my struggle to be true. He will lift me up when I have failed and fallen. He will feed me when my soul is starving.

MARK, too, *there was but one food for all these thousands*. The rich were there, journeying to Jerusalem, and the poorest of the poor were there, from the rude huts by the lochside. Yonder were the quick merchants from the cities, here lolled the farm-hands from the carse. There was a mother crooning to her babe, and here were the children romping on the green. Old men were there with the first glow of heaven about them, and young men with the first glow of earth. Yet Jesus fed them all with the same bread. The strange thing is that no one scorned the victual. All ate, and all were filled. No swift relays of courses had ever been so sweet as the single dish with Jesus on the hill.

Now the wonderful thing about Christ—the living

bread—is that He satisfies us all. What a great gulf between the Jew of Tarsus and the ignorant fishers of Bethsaida! What a world between the gentle Lydia and the rude jailer at Philippi! Yet the power of Christ that made a man of Peter was no less mighty in the heart of Paul; and the love of God that won the love of Lydia conquered the jailor too. In all love, says a thinker, there is something levelling; and the love of God is the great leveller of the ages. It knows no social barriers. It is not powerless where temperaments differ. It comes to *all*, this one glorious Gospel of the grace of God, and all may feed and be satisfied.

AGAIN note, that *in satisfying the needs of men Christ uses the gifts which men bring Him*. Had Jesus willed it so, He could have brought bread out of the mountain stones. Once, God had called water from the rock, and brought manna from the windows of heaven, and I do not know why God in Christ might not have summoned these hidden stores again. But Jesus' miracles were acted parables. They were not wrought to amaze, but to instruct. And so He takes what the disciples give Him, and uses that to feed the crowd. I learn then that it is Christ's way to help the world through men. It is His plan to bring the Kingdom in through us. And if we take our gifts, however poor and humble, and lay them freely at the feet of Jesus, He will so bless and multiply and use them that we shall be amazed, and recognise, as in this miracle, His hand.

I SEE, too, that it was *in the breaking that the bread increased*. A wonder-worker would have touched the loaves, and made them swell and multiply before the crowd. But Jesus blessed, and brake, and gave to the disciples, and ever as they *brake* the bread increased. It was through the blessing the miracle was wrought, and through the breaking it was realised. And ever, through

the breaking, comes the increase, and in the using of our gifts, with God's blessing, are our gifts enlarged. Trade with your talent bravely, and it shall be five. Power springs from power, and service out of service. Never try to do good, and you will find no good to do. Do all the little good you can, and every day will bring a fresh capacity and a new opportunity, until you find that 'there is that scattereth and yet increaseth.'

AND lastly, note that *Jesus was very careful of the fragments*. One would have thought that Jesus was too rich to trouble Himself about the fragments. Surely it was but labour lost to sweat and stoop and stumble in the gloaming, to fill their wicker-baskets with the scraps. But Jesus is imperious. 'Gather the fragments that remain,' is His command. And the twelve disciples, who a little before had been sent out to heal and teach and preach the Gospel, had now, in the presence of the thousands, to set about sweeping the crumbs. It was a splendid discipline. Some one has said that if two angels came to earth, the one to rule an empire, and the other to sweep a crossing, they would never seek to interchange their tasks. And our own poet has told us that

'A servant with this clause
Makes drudgery divine,
Who sweeps a room as for Thy laws,
Makes that and the action fine.'

But was that all? I think not. It was not merely to discipline the disciples that Jesus commanded the fragments to be gathered. We cannot read the story of His life, but we detect a care for the fragments through it all. The fragment of a day, how He employed it! The fragment of a life, how He redeemed it! The fragment of a character, how He ennobled it! Yes, that is His great passion—to love and lift our fragmentary lives till they are brought into the image of His own.

FOURTEENTH SUNDAY

Morning

JACOB'S WRESTLING AT PENIEL

Passages to be read : Gen. xxxii. 1-5, 13-32.

YEARS have gone since we last saw Jacob, on the night of his memorable dream at Bethel. He has passed through many of life's greatest hours, since the day when he left his father's and his mother's tent. He is no longer a solitary fugitive; he is a rich man with a great company around him. And now with wife and children, and with all his vast possessions, he is marching back to the scenes of his early life. But his heart is still doubtful about meeting Esau. What welcome will he get after these years? Will his brother have forgiven, if not forgotten, the sin that made such havoc at home in the old days? It is an hour of dark foreboding for rich Jacob. At least, he can do all in his power to propitiate Esau. He can send him such gifts, and in such artful relays, as will subdue, if they will not soften, his brother's heart. And of such schemes and worldly devices and wise plans the brain of Jacob is full, as he halts on the north bank of the rushing Jabbok. Then in the night time comes his strange encounter. There is no eye to see it, Jacob is left alone. But in the morning as he comes limping down the hill, while the sun rises in the East in fiery splendour, there is not an eye so blind but sees in a moment that some great thing has happened to their leader. The champion

of the wronged had met with him. He had learned that there was a mightier antagonist than Esau to encounter, and that plans and schemes were of small avail with God. He had been won, in the dark hours of loneliness, from trust in self to victorious dependence on Jehovah's arm. How he had fought for his own hand we know. We know, too, how a touch had overcome him. Baffled and beaten in his fight for self-dependence, Jacob was more than conqueror in his failure. For he yielded himself up to Him who had overcome him; in an obedience far larger and purer than before, he became the servant of the God of Bethel; he was no longer, either in name or temper, Jacob the supplanter; but he was Israel, the prince with God.

NOW among the lessons of this rich, if mysterious, story, let us note first *the reserve-strength of heaven*. All night long the wrestling was continued, perhaps with very varying fortunes. Jacob was no mean antagonist, even for this midnight visitant. At one moment it seemed as if Jacob must conquer; at another he was perilously near a fall; and if any cry arose in the long night, such as might have startled the camp across the stream, it was drowned in the brawling of the Jabbok. Now the point to note is that all through this long struggle, the unknown stranger had mighty powers in reserve. He had only to touch the thigh of Jacob with His finger, and the power of the brave wrestler was gone. He did not use these powers in the dreary night; he did not call on them till the dawn was breaking; but all the time that the struggle was raging, they were there, and He might have used them had He chose. Do we not see something closely akin to that, in the life and sufferings of Jesus Christ? Are we not conscious, in His wrestling with all supplanters, of slumbering powers that He would not employ? He could have called on His Father, He tells us in one place, and He would have

given Him innumerable angels. Then at the breaking of the day of triumph, by a single touch (as it were) Christ was revealed, and He whom men had seemed to prevail with in the flesh, was victorious over sin and death.

AGAIN, let us mark how *one touch may reveal God*. Who his antagonist was, Jacob did not know, when he felt himself gripped, as in a vice, by Jabbok. In that moment his mind was full of Esau; he thought of the treachery of long ago—might not this be some treacherous move on Esau's part? for as we sow, so also shall we reap. Not a word was uttered in the first fierce onset, the sky was as pitch, the camp-fires were all out. Probably, in the thrill and tumult of that moment, Jacob noted a thousand small details—he heard the brook, and the cry of the folded cattle, in the intense silence of that fight for life. So the hours passed, and he knew not who opposed him; then came the first faint streaks of returning day; and it was *then*, by a single touch upon the thigh, that Jacob was taught that his antagonist was divine. He had not learned it through the long night's wrestling; he did not learn it by the morning light; it is not likely that the combatant had wings, as in the exquisite picture of the scene by Doré—one touch revealed more to him than all the struggle did. How often has this proved true in human history! We wrestle bravely and the night is dark, but we know not how near God is to us in the gloom. But the finger touches us, or those whom we love; and like Jacob we are maimed, or disabled, or bereaved; and immediately there flashes on us the assurance that nigh to us is a power more than human, and a will that we cannot gainsay, for it is God's. It is no accident that this should have happened to Jacob when the sky was showing the magic of the dawn. When we are touched of God, however sore it be, it is always the hour of sunrise to the soul.

THEN, lastly, let us note that *there are defeats which are victories*. When the morning broke, Jacob was defeated. He was incapable of wrestling any more. His thigh was shrunk ; he could not grip and press ; he could only cling as a desperate man might do. Yet his clinging was more victorious than his wrestling ; it was then he became a Prince and had prevailed ; he had been defeated after all his struggle, but in his defeat was his true victory. Let us all remember that it is often so. There are some victories that are terrible defeats. When we silence conscience, when we trample on conviction, when we refuse to open the door of our own heart, we win the day only to lose the prize. But on the other hand, when our cleverness avails not, when our schemes fail, and our plans miscarry, when our self-dependence is shattered, and our pride is broken, and we are brought down, humbled, to simple trust in God—in that hour we seem to be defeated, as Jacob seemed that night at Peniel ; but for us, as for him, there is a new name—Israel—and a voice from heaven that says we have prevailed.

FOURTEENTH SUNDAY

Evening

JESUS WALKING ON THE SEA

Passage to be read : Matt. xiv. 22-33.

IT had been a day of trial and stress for Jesus, and when the sun set, the danger was not over. There were terrible risks in that enthusiastic crowd that surged and swayed upon the mountain-side. The miracle (vs. 13-21) had made a powerful impression. It had struck deep into these fickle hearts. And if the cry once rang along the hillside ' Jesus is King ! ' who knew

where the echoes of that cry might end? Christ recognised the peril of the hour. He felt the supreme necessity of prayer. It was a moment in the Master's life when the master-passion was to be alone with God. Full of that quiet authority that moved the crowd as wonderfully as it calmed the sea, Jesus constrained the disciples to depart, and sent the throng away. How they would talk as they travelled homeward! How gladly, as the first gusts of storm swept down on them, would they descry the gleaming of their cottage windows! I see the children plucking their mothers' robes, and crying, 'Mother, where is the Teacher now? we left Him on the hill—has He no home?' Perhaps some of them would learn in after days that it was home and heaven and life for Jesus to be alone with God.

MEANTIME the storm had broken. The clouds swept out the stars, the wind came whistling through the glens and corries, the sea ran high. And out in the midst of it toiled the disciples, masterless, shelterless, helpless. It was a wild night after a weary day. It was a strange fulfilment of their promised rest (Mark vi. 31). And yet I question if any holiday among the hills could have taught them as much as did that unmanageable boat. That very evening they had been ordering their Master (v. 15). They had been giving Him advice about five thousand men. They had been eager to manage that great crowd for Jesus—and *now* they cannot manage their little craft! It was a very blessed and very humbling storm. It brought the disciples to their place again. It printed upon their hearts, as in a picture, that the secret of Christian power is dependence.

AND so the night wore on, and every wave that dashed into the boat deepened their need of Jesus. The crowds were home now, the children were asleep, and every light by the lake-side was out. Then with the

dawn came Christ. They spied a form, moving along the ridges of the sea, now lost for a moment in the trough of the waves, now dimmed by the showers of spray. And though they had longed for Jesus, and prayed for Jesus, and this *was* Jesus, they did not know Him, and cried out for fear. Sometimes we get the very thing we ask, and we do not recognise it when it comes. Sometimes we win the very help we need, and we are just as troubled as before. They cried, It is a spirit! The demon of the tempest was abroad, and Jesus—where was He? Who can describe their joy when the familiar voice rang over the white crests, 'Be of good cheer; it is I, be not afraid!'

NOW there are times when a man's character is revealed, and one of these times is often that of storm. When we find Jesus sleeping in the tempest, it teaches us His perfect trust in God. When we rehearse Paul's conduct in the shipwreck, it opens a window into that noble heart. So here, from all the disciples, one stands out; and amid the spray, and in the driving wind of that wild morning, there falls a shaft of light on Simon Peter. It is Peter who cries across the storm, 'Lord, if it be Thou, bid me come to Thee.' It is Peter who flings himself upon the waves to get to Christ. And it is Peter who begins to sink, and would have gone to the depths but for the hand of Jesus. *There* is the strength and there is the weakness of that hero. *There* is the story of his life writ small. When the wind ceased, and the ship's company knelt down to worship Jesus, none felt so deeply as Peter that this was the Son of God.

AMONG the many lessons of this miracle we shall note three. And first remark *the long delays of heaven*. The night must have seemed endless to the twelve. Hour after hour dragged on, and hour after hour brought no word of Jesus. And it was not till the

Roman guard in Cæsarea had changed for the fourth watch, that the beloved voice was heard over the waves. Had they lost heart and hope? Did they suspect that Jesus had forgotten them? We are always ready to think ill of God, because of God's great method of delay. But of this be sure that when our need is greatest, God is nighest. He may delay, He will not disappoint. We must be schooled out of our impatience somehow. We must be trained in waiting and in trusting. It was not only for a night of prayer that Jesus lingered. It was to teach His own that patience of hope which was to win such triumphs for the Church.

I SEE, too, that *Christ comes by unexpected roads*. That night the twelve were longing for their Master, but they never dreamed that He would come that way. If any sail went beating up the loch, their hopes rose, for Jesus might be there. But even Peter, most sanguine of them all, had never guessed that the waves would be His street. Yet by that unexpected avenue the King approached, and on unlikeliest highways He is coming still. By what strange roads Christ enters human hearts! By what strange ways He comes into our homes! A word, a visit of a stranger perhaps, a sickness or a death—and He is here. And it is all so different from what we looked for, that we do not recognise it is the Lord. There are ten thousand thoroughfares for Jesus. His ways of ingress into human souls are endless. Let me not bind Him. Let me not limit Him either to my preconceptions or my prayers. He puts to shame my well-worn offers of salvation, and comes to men by unexpected roads.

AND lastly, this meets me in the story: *we sink when we see nothing but the storm*. When Peter looked to Jesus he was safe. But perhaps a wave came and towered like a wall before him, and for the moment he

could not see his Lord. He saw the waves, he felt the spray, he heard the wind. But he looked and he saw no face, no arm, no hand, and in that moment Peter began to sink. Do we still detect that presence in the tempest? Do we discern the presence and the love of God in the confusion of our common day? When we see nothing but the storm, we sink. When we see Christ enthroned in it, we triumph.

FIFTEENTH SUNDAY

Morning

AI AND THE SIN OF ACHAN

Passage to be read : Josh. vii. 1-26.

JERICHO was now in ruins, and Israel must press on to other victories. Had Jericho been the capital of the land, its fall would have been the signal for a wide submission. But Canaan was broken up into many petty kingships, and Jericho with its suburbs was but one of these. So the conquest of Jericho was not final ; it left the other cities unsubdued ; and the first to oppose the march of Israel was the little highland town of Ai. It had a familiar ring for Joshua, that name. It mingled with boyish memories of the story of Abraham (Gen. xii. 8). And when Joshua heard that yonder town to the west was Bethel, how near him it would bring the God of Jacob ! Ai, then, must be taken next ; and Joshua, acting on his scouts' advice, sent some three thousand men to the assault.

BUT if Jericho, that seemed impregnable, had fallen, Ai, that looked an easy capture, stood fast. The hardy townsmen did not await attack. They sallied out of the ports as the Israelites were clambering up the hill, and in the swift impetuosity of their highland charge, as before the torrent of a highland river, they swept their foes down the slope into the quarries. It was a terrible check to these victorious arms. It staggered the faith of all, even of Joshua. We do not wonder to find Joshua, with rent clothes and dust upon his head, lying

on his face before the Lord. Then Joshua learned the secret of the failure. The Captain of the armies of the Lord had sheathed His sword (v. 13), because Jehovah's covenant had been broken. And what the sin was that had angered God, and how the guilt of it was fixed on Achan, and how Achan was punished in the valley, all this, in the strong and simple words of Scripture, is written for us in these verses.

NOW let us learn some lessons, and first *the perils of our victories*. After seven days spent marching around Jericho, Ai must have looked a petty place. Compared with those mighty walls that had seemed to rise to heaven, the battlements of Ai were as nothing. Flushed with their victory, heated with the slaughter, the Israelites needed no miracle to capture Ai. There was little necessity of calling upon God to help them to win a little place like that. Three thousand men will do it, said the spies. Then let three thousand men be sent, said Joshua. But of earnest prayer to God for victory, and of cries for help to the Man with the drawn sword, I find never a whisper in the story. And that is the constant peril of our triumphs. They make us confident and self-assertive. Our heart is throbbing, our arm is strong, we almost forget our need of God to-day. So God rebukes His children, lifts up the cup of failure to their lips, scatters them on the hills and through the quarries; until like Joshua and all the elders, and all the apostles and disciples too, they learn that 'without Me ye can do nothing.'

NOTE, too, that *the blame of our failures may lie at our own doors*. When the three thousand fled and the thirty-six were slain, Joshua went straight to God about it, and he did well. But read his prayer, and you will catch a strange note in it—Joshua *reproaches* God. Why hast Thou brought us here? Why art Thou going to

destroy us? Why were we not content to dwell across the Jordan—as if the power of God had not been seen at Jericho. Then Joshua learned—and none but a loving Father would have so taught him—that the blame lay not in heaven, but at his door. It was not God who was responsible for the flight; it was sin in the camp of Joshua that had caused it. Blame not the promises, charge not that sad disaster on the Throne; the secret of failure lies in the tents of Israel! How prone we still are when we are worsted, to carry the blame of it too far away! How ready, in every fault and every failure, to trace the source of it anywhere but in ourselves! In spiritual defeats never accuse another. Never cry out against the name of God. It is in the tented muster of my heart, and in the things buried and stamped under the ground there, that the secret of my moral disaster lies.

MARK, too, *the wide sweep of a single sin*. When Achan stole the Babylonian garment and the gold, he never dreamed that others would suffer for it. The crime was his, and if it should ever be discovered, the punishment would fall on his own back. If one had whispered to him in the critical moment that the whole army would suffer for his tampering, how Achan would have ridiculed the thought! Yet that was the very thing that happened, and that very thing is happening still. From Joshua to the meanest camp-follower of Israel, there was not one untouched by Achan's folly. It scattered the three thousand before Ai, it slew the six-and-thirty, it spread dismay through all the host. And how Achan's home was brought to ruin by it, is all told in this tragical chapter. That is ever the sad work of sin. Like the circles of ripples, its consequences spread, and on what far shores they shall break, none knows but God. I may think that my sin is hidden. I may be certain none has observed my vice. But in ways mysterious its influences radiate, and others suffer because I am bad.

BE sure, too, that your sin will find you out. Humanly speaking, it was the unlikeliest thing in the world that the sin of Achan should ever be detected. There was no one to miss that Babylonian garment, for the wearer was lying stabbed in Jericho. There would be never a hand stretched out for the silver again, for the hands that had counted it were stiff in death. When Achan stole it, too, the moment was one of such overmastering excitement, that the eyes of his fellow-comrades had been blind. He was quite safe. He could never be caught. Then came that morning when the priest stood in the door of the tabernacle, and the people passed before him in their order. And Judah was taken, and in Judah the clan of the Zerahites; and the house of Zabdi was taken, and in that house the family of Carmi, and when one by one the members of this family filed past, the voice of Jehovah indicated Achan. Was there ever such an instance of divine detection? Ever? —the page of every human life is written with them. God is all merciful: God is love. But be not deceived, God is not mocked; whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap.

FIFTEENTH SUNDAY

Evening

THE TRANSFIGURATION

Passage to be read: Matt. xvii. 1-21.

EVERY reader of the Bible has noticed how often it brings us into mountain scenery. It was on a mountain that Abraham prepared to offer Isaac. It was from a mountain-top that men received the law of Moses, and from a mountain-side the law of Christ. The bitterest conflict between Elijah and the prophets of

Baal was on Mount Carmel. John was on a great mountain when he saw the new Jerusalem descend; and on a mountain occurred the Transfiguration. Do you think that choice of place is but an accident? I do not think so. For always, in the grandeur of the mountain-top, lifting its masses silencewards and heavenwards, 'above the smoke and stir of this dim spot,' men have perceived God's choice environment for the highest hours of holiest souls. The dullest of us knows the fuller life that stirs us on the hills. It is the fit scene for the Transfiguration of our Lord.

FIRST, then, let us note that the Transfiguration *was an answer to prayer*. Jesus took Peter and James and John, we read, and went up into a mountain to pray and as He prayed, the fashion of His countenance was altered (Luke ix. 28-29). It may be we shall never grasp the mystery of the prayers of Jesus Christ. The simplest prayer *you* ever breathed raises a score of problems when you think on it, and these problems are multiplied a thousandfold when we are thinking on the prayers of our Redeemer. But the fact remains that Jesus prayed, intensely, passionately, resolutely, till the end; and if it is asked what He was praying for on this mountain, I think we may reverently give this reply. It was the thought of His *sufferings* that filled Him. It was the vision of His *death* that bowed Him down. Eight days before, Jesus had talked of that. He had told His disciples how He must suffer and die. And all the evangelists date this mountain-scene from the memorable hour of that conversation. It was of His death, too, Moses and Elias spake. Now, these are hints of the inner life of Jesus. These are like far-off echoes of His cry. His hands were trembling as they grasped the cup. The shadow of the cross was on His soul. He went to the hill to agonise with God, and the Transfiguration was the answer.

THUS, then, we reach the inner meaning of the scene. It was not a spectacle. It was not acted out for James and John. Its chief importance was for the heart of Jesus. Can we discover, then, its meaning for Christ? Can we see how it greatly strengthened Him for Calvary? That is to get to the marrow of the story. For the memory of this hour was music to Jesus, when all the daughters of music were brought low. It was song and strength to Him, when He went forth to die.

NOTE first, then, that *it gave to Jesus a fresh assurance of His Father's love*, for there came a voice out of the cloud, 'This is My beloved Son.' There are times when we are sorely tempted to doubt the love of God; and if our Redeemer was tempted in all points like as we are, this sore temptation must have fallen on Him. And the one week, in His three-and-thirty years, when it would light on Him with most tremendous power, would be the week before the Transfiguration. *Till then*, Christ had been climbing upward, amid the welcomes of an eager people. *From then*, He was to journey downwards to the cross of Calvary and to the grave. The tides were turned. The crisis had been reached. With terrible clearness He realised His death. Oh, what a task, in the full sight of Calvary, *still* to believe in the changeless love of God! God saw, God understood. God strengthened and stablished the human soul of Jesus. And from that hour—come agony, come death, Jesus is still the well-beloved Son.

AGAIN, the Transfiguration assured Jesus *that if His agony was not understood on earth, it was fully understood in heaven*. In His sufferings and in His death Jesus was never understood on earth. Men understood the wisdom of His speech. They saw the power of His deeds of healing. But His sufferings they could not understand. The thought of crucifixion was intolerable

to the disciples. Even Peter, who loved his Master so, out of his love would have kept Him from the cross. But Moses and Elias understood what Peter and James and John quite failed to see. They spake of His decease (Luke ix. 31). It was the theme of heaven whence they had come. There might be none to sympathise on earth; but the spirits of just men made perfect, in the home above, were following with unbounded love and wonder the progress of Jesus to the cross.

MARK, too, that the Transfiguration assured Jesus *of the true greatness of His mission.* We never doubt the greatness of that work. We know the value of His life and death. The centuries are but a commentary on His power. Yet we sometimes wonder if in the weary round of humble service, the greatness of His task was ever bedimmed for Jesus? We are amazed, as we read the Gospel story, at the seeming insignificance of many of the days and deeds of Christ. He lived in villages and companied with humble folk. He healed their sick; He preached to unlettered crowds. So day succeeded day, and the sun rose and westered, and men could not see the splendour of His work. Was Jesus sometimes tempted to forget it too? If so, it was the very love of God that sent Moses and Elijah to the mount. For Moses and Elijah were the past. They were the spirits of the law and prophecy. And now the past hands on its work to Jesus. All that the law had vainly striven to do, and all that prophecy had seen afar, was to be crowned on Calvary. *His*, then, was no fragmentary life. It was the very crisis of the world. For all the past was centring in Him, and from Him the future was to stretch away.

AND lastly, note how the Transfiguration made Jesus strong, *because it gave Him a foretaste of His glory.* His sufferings were near; His death was near; but on

the mount Christ knew that heaven was nearer still. For the dazzling glow of heaven was on His face, and the saints of glory were standing by His side, and His Father's voice was music in His ear. Not that heaven was ever unreal to Jesus; but in view of the intensity of coming sorrow, there must be intense conviction of the joy beyond. It is this that was granted to Jesus on the mount. Is it not given to His children too? There is always the burning bush before the desert. There is ever the mountain-top before the garden. In the strength of the joy that is set before us, we endure the cross and despise the shame.

SIXTEENTH SUNDAY

Morning

GIDEON

Passage to be read : Judg. vii. 1-25.

I N chapter six we have the strange story of Gideon's call to be the deliverer of Israel, in chapter seven we have the even stranger story of that deliverance itself. Gideon had marshalled an army of two and thirty thousand to do battle with Midian in the valley. It seemed a mighty host, these thousands, but the Midianites were like the sand of the seashore for multitude, and Gideon may have prayed that his numbers might be *doubled*. Instead of that, God *lessened* them. First, two and twenty thousand were debarred, because on their own confession they were afraid. Then nine thousand seven hundred more were excluded. It was with the remanent three hundred Gideon was called to fight. It was with these he was to go and conquer. If his thousands had been victorious, it would have been a *human* victory. If the three hundred won, the dullest heart in the whole camp would feel that the power of the Almighty was in it.

I CAN hardly wonder that Gideon was afraid. The odds against him seemed so tremendous that even his gallant heart began to sink. And it was then that God bade him play the spy, and hear the talk in one of the tents of Midian. A Midianite soldier was telling his dream to a comrade. It was about a cake of barley-

bread that came rolling down the hill, and striking against the tent royal, overturned it. And I dare say Gideon was far from flattered when he heard Israel likened to a barley cake. But when he heard the interpretation of the dream, and learned how the deep belief had spread through Midian that the hour of victory for Israel had come, Gideon fell on his knees and worshipped God, and then with a new heart climbed the hill again to muster his three hundred for the fight. Then follows the tale of that amazing battle—the strangest combat this world has ever seen. We want no commentary on it. The story lives and speaks. There is no mother but will rivet her children with the pitchers and the torches and the trumpets, and the midnight cry, ‘For Jehovah and for Gideon!’

NOW note some of the lessons of this chapter, and first, *apparent weakening may be real strengthening*. Had you asked Gideon his thought about his army, he would have told you it could bear a little strengthening. Had you asked him how he would propose to strengthen it, he would have said by recruiting a few more thousands. It is what every general and every government has said when faced in the field by unexpected numbers. But *God* said, we do not want more men. It is not by numbers that He works His will. He called for reduction, not for recruiting, that morning, and when the army was very weak then was it strong. And the Gospel triumphs have all been won that way. They have begun with a sifting and separating out. Jesus might have had a thousand soldiers to carry the banner of His kingdom through the world. But He knew men’s hearts. He read their motives. He saw the perils of an unstable crowd. So He chose *twelve* out of the ranks of His followers; like Gideon’s three hundred, they were to win the day; and all the history of a triumphing Gospel is our pledge of the wisdom and strength of that apparent weakening.

A *GAIN our trifling acts reveal our characters.* When Gideon brought his army down to the water, God tested them by the way in which they drank. Thousands went down upon their knees to drink, and God rejected these. Three hundred licked as a dog licks, and it was these three hundred who were chosen. Now, I do not know that we can say with certainty why it was these lappers who were picked; though I am sure of this, that they were not picked (as some have held) for drinking in a *cowardly* fashion. God never sets a premium upon cowardice. Rather their lapping was a mark of the disciplined soldier, who kept his feet (and his head too) when drinking, and would not kneel for fear of sudden surprise. Or if the Bible means that they flung themselves down, and put their lips to the river for a draught, perhaps that was a sign of a deep faith in the Lord their Shepherd, who 'maketh me to *lie down* in green pastures, He leadeth me beside the still waters.' But the point is, whatever the explanation, God read their character in that trifling act, and in our little deeds and trivial speech we are detected still. We should all like to be judged by our few splendid hours. We are loth to accept the estimate of common days. But it is not in our dreams we are ourselves. It is in the playground, in the school-room, around the fire, at the dinner-table. What are you *there*? that is the question. What kind of character is welling over to-day? A thread of gossamer may show how the wind blows. A petty act may unlock all the deeps. Watch, in the common things. Our trifling acts reveal our characters.

O *NCE more note our words may travel further than we know.* When the Midianite soldier told his dream to his comrades, he never thought that it was overheard. The camp was asleep. There was not a sound except the cry of the watchman and the heavy breathing and champing of the camels. He could have sworn that his

weary tent-fellow was his one auditor. But what dark figures are these outside the tent? Who are these that have crept up so silently, and are eagerly listening to every word? These are none other than Gideon and Phurah. So the dream passed from Midian to Israel, and put new heart into the three hundred on the hill, and when the trumpets sounded and the torches flashed, and the battle-cry of Israel rang with triumph, little did the Midianite soldier think how the telling of his dream had been determinative. We never know how far our words may carry. We cannot tell what unseen listeners we have. Our words speed out into the dark, and we think them dead, but we shall never learn how they have helped or hindered till the story of interlacing lives is written out.

AND lastly, observe how *God wins His battles in unexpected ways*. I have heard of men going to battle with strange armour. There were some curious implements of war in the hands of the late rioters in China. But to fight with pitchers and with torches and with trumpets, and fighting so, to scatter tens of thousands, is the strangest narrative of war the world has known. Yet in ways like that God won His battles for Israel. And in ways like that He wins His battles still. Is it the sword that has made the Gospel victorious? Mohammed may need the sword, Jesus does not. It is by every man becoming a torch-bearer, though his treasure may be carried in an earthen vessel; it is by every man sounding the Gospel note, if not on the trumpet, at least in heart and life; it is in ways like these, rooted in trust on God, that the little one has ever chased the thousand, and will be more than conqueror to the end.

SIXTEENTH SUNDAY

Evening

THE SYRO-PHŒNICIAN WOMAN

Passage to be read: Matt. xv. 21-31.

THE first interest of this story lies in the fact that Jesus is now moving in heathen territory.

It is a pledge and forecast of the time when the spirit of Jesus, living in countless missionaries, will spread the knowledge of the Kingdom throughout heathendom. When we think of the heathen, our thoughts fly far away. There are vast distances of sea between us and them. But a walk of a few miles, over the hills of Galilee, brought Jesus to the borders of a heathen country. We must not think, however, that they were heathens like the Africans. They were not wild barbarians like the Scots whom Columba found around him in Iona. They were an ancient people with a wonderful history, skilled navigators, builders of mighty cities. Who could have thought that that wearied Galilean, journeying northward for a little rest, was to be far more powerful in the world than these old kingdoms? Yet Tyre is to-day a mean town of ruins, and the commerce and the colonies of Sidon are forgotten, and the Kingdom of Jesus is becoming world-wide.

ONE of the first stones of that world-wide empire was laid when this woman got her girl again. We sometimes think there are no homes in heathendom. We think that the children are all cruelly treated, and are never encircled by a mother's love. But here was a mother who loved her daughter so, and had such an agony of heart about her, that it led her straight to the

feet of Jesus Christ. I have read that in the wild American prairies, if a traveller steps out of his track but a few yards, he often finds it impossible to discover his way back. But there is a flower there, called the compass-weed, that always bends to the north; and when the traveller finds it, and watches how it leans, it shows him his course, and sets him right again. And all that is noblest in the human heart has been like a compass-weed to lead a wandering world to Jesus. It was this mother's love that led her. It was her passion for her daughter that constrained her. A little child had brought her to His feet.

[I]T has been asked, how could this woman have heard of Jesus? But I do not think we need trouble about that. I am quite sure she was not a Jewish proselyte. If you had peered through the window of her humble cottage, when her daughter was crying and writhing on the floor, you would have found her pleading for mercy from her heathen gods. But just as the woman with the issue, having tried all physicians, determined at last to steal a cure from Jesus, so this poor mother, who was only the worse for all her heathen gods, determined at last to come to Jesus too. Some village neighbour had told her of this Son of David. Some friend had been marketing in Capernaum that morning when the nobleman's boy had been brought to life again. And if He could do that for a centurion's boy, would He not do as much for a Syro-Phœnician's girl? She hurries to Christ. She pleads with Him. She bows at His feet. She will not be gainsaid. Until at last even Jesus wonders at her faith, and conquered by its power and persistency, gives her her heart's desire. They say love conquers all things, but it is only faith that can conquer Jesus. A faith like this, powerful in ten thousand hearts, would give us a time of Pentecost in Christendom.

NOW what was the real greatness of her faith? And how did it make even Jesus of Nazareth marvel? Well, first, *it overcame the prejudices of her race*. She was a heathen woman, trained in a heathen home. She had bowed down to idols from a child. She had been taught from infancy to scorn the Jews. If she had asked her aged mother by the fireside for advice, she would have been told that to go to Jesus was to disgrace the family. If she had gone to the priests and asked for their permission, they would have banned her by all the powers of heaven. But she broke through everything to get to Jesus—all that was customary, all that was dear. And Jesus knew what barriers had gone down, when she lay at his feet and cried, Lord, help me. Have I no barriers to break to get to Christ? And are they keeping me back this Sabbath day? We are not born and bred in a heathen land. God has been good to us and set us down where the church-bells ring, and the Bible is on the table. But sometimes a friendship, and sometimes what the others will say, and sometimes the jeering of a brother or sister, have kept us from coming right out for our Captain; and this poor heathen woman is going to shame us when we all stand face to face with Christ.

AND, again, *her faith mastered the natural shrinking of her heart*. It steeled her for this terrible ordeal. When a woman loves her daughter as this mother did, she is never fond of attracting public notice. She will watch all night by her sick daughter's bed; she will make her cottage a very heaven of service; but to cry out in public, and have the gaze of the strange crowd upon her, is very alien to a true mother's heart. I dare say in her after-days she often wondered how she had ever done it. We cannot explain these high enthusiasms. But if *we* cannot explain them, Jesus can; and in the enthusiasm of this woman He saw faith. It was faith that had

prompted her to leave her cottage. It was faith that had nerved her heart before the company. Had she not ventured everything on Christ, she would have been sitting weeping by her daughter yet.

AND then her faith was great *because it so stoutly refused to be denied*. No silence and no rebuff could drive her off. She was simply determined that she should have an answer. And so closely are faith and love bound up together, that the cry of her little daughter in her ear, and the picture of her daughter in her heart, kindled her faith into a flame again when it was almost quenched. Did Christ keep silence? She still cried, Lord, help me! Did He discourage her? She was still at his feet. Did He speak about the children and the little dogs? She has caught the words up, and made a plea from them. And it is in that magnificent persistency, as humble and reverent as it is persevering, that the true greatness of her faith is found. We have a beautiful hymn beginning, 'O love, that will not let me go.' We want another beginning, 'O faith, that will not let Him go.' When we have *that* faith—and this woman had it—our hearts and homes shall be as blessed as hers.

SEVENTEENTH SUNDAY

Morning

THE DEATH OF SAMSON

Passage to be read: Judg. xvi. 21-31.

SAMSON was a child of the tribe of Dan, and in the book of Genesis we have a forecast of the history of Dan that was strangely fulfilled in Samson's life and death. When Jacob was dying he called his sons to his bedside, and when Dan came in, and knelt before his father, these were the words he heard: 'Dan shall judge his people as one of the tribes of Israel. Dan shall be a serpent in the way, an adder in the path, that biteth the horse's heels so that his rider shall fall backward' (Gen. xlix. 16-17). Was not that prophecy of Dan made good in Samson? Was not Samson the typical spirit of that tribe? He was a judge. He stung the Philistines like any serpent. And what better picture could we have of that last scene at Gaza than the adder biting the horse's heel, and the horse rearing, and the rider crushed? I dare say Samson never dreamed how he was acting out old Jacob's prophecy. We seldom feel, amid the dust of it, that we are walking on a predestined way.

NOW the story of Samson is like a summer morning that opens with sunshine and the song of birds. There is the rioting life of a June day about him when we meet him first, striding to Timnath. These unshorn locks are his badge of consecration. He has been set

apart by heaven to be a Nazarite. And if we would learn what a Nazarite was like, let us read the sixth of Numbers and we shall see. But all the glory of a summer morning may change into a dreary afternoon, and all the promise of a splendid youth may end in darkness and the prison-house. So has it been with many a strong young fellow. So was it with this Hercules of Dan. God dowered him with prodigious strength, for God had set him a prodigious task; but the secret of his strength was in his hair, as if to warn him how lightly it might be lost. And Samson forgot that. He forgot the precarious tenure of his prowess. He did what you and I have often done, he was so strong and happy he neglected God. He rollicked and he jested and he sinned—*this* man who had been heralded by angel-ministries, and who was summoned to be the champion of the Lord; until at last he woke, and all his strength was gone, and all his opportunity was squandered.

THEN followed, swiftly and easily, his capture, and on the heels of his capture came his death—the grandest commentary on these verses in all the world's literature is the *Samson Agonistes* of John Milton. Trapped by the Philistines, Samson was led to Gaza. It was at Gaza that Samson had showed his strength. It was the gates of Gaza he had swung upon his shoulder, and carried, bar and all, up to the top of Hebron. And now he enters these same gates again, how changed! a helpless prisoner: and do you not see how the streets are crowded, and women are peering out of every window (and one of them felt her heart throb when she saw him), and the boys are taunting him, and in their snatches of doggerel verse are shouting the story of that famous midnight? Worse still, Samson was blind. They had bored his eyes out with a red-hot iron. It was through his eyes that his sin had entered (xvi. 1), and his eyes are the first to suffer for his sin. So blinded, and fettered

with brass, he is led to the prison-house. And there in the damp dungeon, this child of freedom and of the open sky—his very name meant *Sunny*—is set to the grinding work of women (Exod. xi. 5) and slaves.

THEN comes the end. One of the chief gods of the Philistines was Dagon, a god whose images had the head and the hands of a man, and as some have thought, the tail of a fish (1 Sam. v. 4, margin). It was into his house at Ashdod that the ark was carried (1 Sam. v.). It was into his temple that the head of Saul was brought (1 Chron. x. 10). Now on a great feast-day, when Dagon's house in Gaza is filled with the flower of the Philistines, and the common people are crowded on the roof, and all are heated with the banqueting and wine, the cry rises, 'Call for Samson that he may make us sport!' Did the sound of the call reach Samson through his grated windows? Did the hoarse murmur of six thousand tongues crying his name stir something of the old spirit in his heart? They thought they were summoning their *fool*, these thousands. They did not know they were summoning their *fate*. For Samson came, and leaned upon the pillars of the temple, and cried to God for one last hour of might. And how the pillars trembled and broke, and as with a burst of thunder the house fell, crushing the multitude to death and Samson in their midst, let the Word of God tell in its own tongue. Then his kinsmen came down, and found the dead body of their hero, and carried it home and buried it in a quiet spot between Zorah and Eshtaol,—the very spot where in the sunny morning the Spirit of God had fallen upon the lad (xiii. 25). What text shall we write on that sequestered grave? 'Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, neither let the mighty man glory in his might, let not the rich man glory in his riches, but let him that glorieth glory in this, that he understandeth and knoweth Me' (Jer. ix. 23-4).

NOW let us think upon another death, the death of Jesus of Nazareth on Calvary. In every age wise souls have loved to contrast and compare the death of Samson with the death of Jesus. For Samson was betrayed and so was Jesus, and both by one who bore the name of friend. And they mocked Samson and made a jest of him, and smote him on the cheek perhaps (Micah v. 1), crying, Who smote thee? And Samson in dying pulled down Dagon's temple, and Jesus through his death overthrew the kingdom of darkness. And Samson died praying, and so did Jesus; but the prayer of Samson was for vengeance on the Philistines, and the prayer of Jesus was, 'Father, forgive them, they know not what they do.'

SEVENTEENTH SUNDAY

Evening

THE MAN BORN BLIND

Passage to be read : John ix.

THE preceding chapter closes with the Jews insulting Jesus. Angered by His claim to *have been* before Abraham was, they had taken up stones to cast at Him. It was then that Jesus, going through the midst of them, passed by; and it was in passing by that He saw the man. Would you have had eyes for a blind beggar, do you think, after treatment such as Jesus got? Would you have been swift to benefit a Jew, when the Jews had hardly dropped the stones to stone you? It reveals the self-forgetfulness of Christ, that after this rough handling by the Jews, He should handle a Jew so tenderly as this.

IF there is one story which we know by heart, we have it here. Some of us never see a blind man by the pavement, but we think of these eyes that were opened long ago. There are men who have been blinded by disease or accident ; *this* man was blind from birth. He had never seen the meadows or the hills ; he had never looked on his mother when she kissed him. Was there any hope for lost eyes like these ? The cleverest doctor in Jerusalem said *No* ; but Jesus of Nazareth passed by, and *He* said, *Yes*. It is Christ's way to delight in saying *Yes* when all the wisdom of the world is saying *No*. And then how Jesus made the clay, and bade the blind man wash his eyes in Siloam, and how the blind man went and washed and saw (like another Cæsar with his *veni, vidi, vici*), all this and all that followed it, the mother will tell to her delighted children.

THERE are one or two lessons that we must not miss, and first, *there is a purpose in our sufferings*. That blind man was a puzzle to the disciples. The first thing *Jesus* thought of was to heal him ; the first thing *the disciples* thought of was—'Who was the sinner, this man or his father ?' They might have learned from Job, if nowhere else, not *always* to link sin and suffering together. Then Jesus taught them what the blindness meant. There was a purpose in these sightless orbs. They were to bring the heart, that beat behind them somewhere, to trust in the great Saviour of mankind. How often had the blind boy asked his mother, 'O mother, what is the meaning of this darkness ?' And with a breaking heart his mother had had to answer, 'My dearest child, I do not know ; God knows.' Now Jesus came, and mother and son were taught. The secret of the darkness was unlocked. It was that the works of God might be shown forth. Do I speak to any cripple lad this evening ? Shall this little article be read to some blind girls ? Be patient ; do not call it cruel and

bitter. The day is coming, perhaps here, certainly *yonder*, when *you* will understand.

AGAIN, the story makes this clear—*Christ loves to help our faith*. Some miracles were accomplished by a word. When Jesus went to the grave of Lazarus, He only cried, 'Lazarus, come forth.' But *here* He made clay and anointed the eyes of the blind man with it, and the question is, Why did our Lord do that? Did He *need* to do it? No. Did he wish the cure to be reckoned doubly wonderful, by adding obstacles that made it doubly difficult? I feel at once that is not Jesus' way. He wished to strengthen *faith*, that is the answer, for without faith there are no mighty works. Had the man not heard from his neighbours twenty times, that spittle and clay were medicinal for the eyes? Do we not read in *Tacitus* of a blind man who begged Vespasian to spit upon his orbs? Jesus began upon the man's own level. He quickened faith by starting from common ground. He was leading the man by an old village recipe to the faith through which a miracle is possible.

ONCE more I note that *the man was so changed, the people hardly knew him*. The friends were sore perplexed. One could have sworn this was the man who begged. Another was ready to swear that it was not. Some argued that he was very like the beggar, but every one of them recognised the change. Now there are many things that change a man. Absence will do it—we hardly know our friend when he comes home! Suffering does it—what a difference in your sister since that illness! But neither absence nor suffering so changes a man as does the wonderful handiwork of Jesus. It gives new hopes. It brings new outlook. It kindles new desires. It creates a new heart. Old things pass away under the touch of Jesus, and all things become new.

LASTLY, observe about this man, that *it was what Christ had done for him that kept him leal*. He was sorely tempted to be false to Jesus. There was trouble at home, his parents were endangered. The priests and Pharisees were passionately angry at this new jewel in the crown of Jesus. And to think that *he*—who yesterday sat and begged—should stand in the temple and fight it with the Pharisees! I am sure that when he went to bed at night, he wondered, in the dark, how he had done it. And then, through the lattice of his room, he saw the twinkling of a single star. Ah! it was *that*, that eyesight, that had stirred him. It was what Christ had done for him that kept him loyal. Let it be so with every one of us. Remember Bethlehem! Remember Calvary! Recall what Christ has done for you, and then—

Should the world and sin oppose,
 We will follow Jesus,
He is greater than our foes,
 We will follow Jesus.
On his promise we depend,
He will succour and defend,
Help and keep us to the end,
 We will follow Jesus.

EIGHTEENTH SUNDAY

Morning

RUTH'S CHOICE

Passage to be read : Ruth i. 1-22.

THE period of this beautiful story is uncertain. If Boaz was Rahab's son (Matt. i. 5), its date would be not long after the fall of Jericho. But if the genealogy from Boaz to David be complete (Ruth iv. 21-22), it belongs to a much later day. It is a simple story. There lived a family in one of the streets of Bethlehem, belonging to the old stock of Ephrath (Gen. xxxv. 19). The father's name was Elimelech, the mother's Naomi, and there were two sons, Mahlon and Chilion. Now, Bethlehem means 'the house of bread,' and Elimelech means 'God is his King,' and you would have thought that a man with a name like that, in a town with a name like that, might have trusted God to supply all his need. But a famine came, and Elimelech lost heart. In the House of Bread, there was no bread in the house. So he took his wife and his two sons, set out from Bethlehem and forded Jordan, rode through the hilly country of the Reubenites, and came at last to Moab. How rich the fields were here! What wonderful heads of corn these were that rustled and bowed by the bridle-path! It was the very land Elimelech had dreamed of. He settled down there. Moab became his home. And by and by, so naturalised was the family, that his two sons found wives among the Moabites; the name of Mahlon's wife was Ruth, of Chilion's, Orpah.

BUT the years passed and changes came. Naomi laid her husband in the grave, then opened the same grave for her two sons, till Moab grew such a sad home for her that her heart began to cry again for Bethlehem. Then tidings came that the famine was at an end. Was that not God beckoning her homeward? So she set off, and Orpah and Ruth were with her, by that same path down which, ten years ago, Mahlon and Chilion had come singing. They were dead now; but what a comfort Orpah and Ruth were! And then on the hillside, it flashed in a twinkling on her motherly heart what a sacrifice she was asking them to make. They were leaving their mothers, their homes, their kindred. They were travelling out into a lifelong exile. It was not right. It was a shame to sacrifice these girlish lives for the sake and solace of her ageing heart. So she kissed them amid her tears. She pled with them passionately to return. And we all know how Orpah yielded. And we all know the choice of Ruth.

NOW, there are some features of Ruth's choice we must not miss. And first, *Ruth's choice was the choosing of one who loved her well.* How tenderly Naomi loved her daughters is seen in her earnest pleading for their return. Had she loved them less, she would never have hesitated to carry them over Jordan into Bethlehem. It was her love that gave her such a deep concern that her dear children should have a happy future. And Ruth knew this. She trusted Naomi because Naomi loved her so. She chose to go with Naomi over the hills, for she knew that there would be always strength and sunshine, if she were living near the love of Naomi's heart. That is the reason why every true mother prays that the boys and girls may climb the hills with Christ. He loves them with a love so deep and generous that even Naomi's is shallow beside it. He came to earth, He bled, He died

for them. It is because He first loved *us* that we love *Him*, and set our faces to the hills with Him, to make for the house-mystical of bread.

AGAIN, *Ruth's choice was taken in the teeth of difficulties.* It is a hard thing always to choose well and wisely. There are so many arguments at hand for what we'd *like* to do. There seem so few sometimes for what we *ought* to do. But I question if there have been many choices made in the face of such difficulties as met Ruth. Just think of some of them. The *past* was against her: she had been cradled in a heathen home and trained in the worship of immoral gods. Her *sister* was against her—Orpah had turned and was travelling home again, and Orpah was the elder woman of the two. Her *mother* seemed against her—it was hard to resist these tears from Naomi's eyes, these earnest pleadings from Naomi's lips. The *future* was against her—how cheerless the prospect seemed of living an exile, and never setting eyes on home again! These things were fighting against the choice of Ruth. These whispering voices called her back to Moab. But the girl was a heroine. There was a depth of devotion in her heart to Naomi. And neither height, nor depth, nor length, nor breadth would separate her from the love of Naomi now. Is it difficult for you to choose the right? Is it supremely hard to resolve to follow Jesus? There is something in the past that holds you back; there is the example of a friend or sister. There is the dreary prospect for the future; there is the voice of Jesus bidding you count the cost. Ruth knew that long ago. These pleas kept ringing in her heart upon the hill. But *she* played the heroine for Naomi, and *you* may play the heroine for Jesus. Ruth stood and triumphed, and you are her sister and may have her crown.

ONCE more, *Ruth's choice was marked by an entire surrender.* Sometimes, when we are going a journey with a friend, we lay down conditions before we start. We shall only travel by a certain road; we shall only stop so long at certain towns. But when Ruth set out with Naomi that morning she never dreamed of any stipulation. She had taken Mahlon once for better or for worse, and she was taking Naomi the same way now. Let Naomi lead, and Ruth will always follow. Let Naomi halt, Ruth will rest there. Ruth will not dictate; she wants a lowly place. Her choice is marked by an entire surrender. Now once I have started out to follow Christ, let me remember that I must follow Ruth. There is no hope of peace or power or joy, save on the basis of complete surrender. If Ruth had quarrelled with Naomi about the route, how hearts would have ached upon that homeward track! If Ruth had girded because the hills were steep, and the valleys were damp, and the Reubenites were coarse, what a sorry party would have entered Bethlehem! But, 'where thou goest I will go, and where thou lodgest I will lodge,' and they came to Bethlehem with songs and everlasting joy upon their heads. You understand that parable? Then live it out. 'These are they which follow the Lamb whithersoever He goeth.'

THEN, lastly, you will note, *Ruth's choice was followed by a great reward.* She got a place among God's people, that was something. She got her sweet story written in the Bible, that was much. But best of all, she became the ancestress of David, and of Jesus of Nazareth, the Saviour of the world. All that sprang from the choice in Moab, and all that she would have missed if she had chosen selfishly.

EIGHTEENTH SUNDAY

Evening

THE GOOD SHEPHERD

Passage to be read: John x. 1-18.

LAST Sunday we were speaking of the man born blind; to-day our lesson is the Good Shepherd. And I dare say it seems at first as if there were no link between the two. But if it is hard for *us* to find a link, it was all plain as daylight to the man born blind. He hid in the crowd, and drank in every word that Jesus said; and as he heard that wonderful talk about the shepherd, he said to himself, 'Every syllable of that is meant for me.' Had not the Pharisees excommunicated him? Had they not slammed the door of blessing in his face? '*I am the door,*' says Jesus. Had not the Pharisees been mad with rage that he, a poor lost sheep, should dare to teach *them*, the shepherds of the people? '*I am the good shepherd,*' says Jesus. Christ knew what had happened. He knew the treatment His beggar-friend had got. It stirred His heart into this noble eloquence. And as the sunflower springs from its seed, so all the wealth and beauty of our chapter spring from the healing of the man born blind.

OF course, when Jesus calls Himself a shepherd, He is far from being the first to use that figure. The originality of Jesus does not lie in saying things that were never said before. Old Homer (whom I hope many of my readers love) is fond of calling his heroes shepherds of men. It had been used of Cyrus in Isaiah; of rulers and prophets in Jeremiah and Ezekiel. It is

the name given to the teacher of wisdom in Ecclesiastes. It comes to full bloom in the twenty-third psalm. I wonder, too, if you have ever thought how many of God's great leaders *had* been shepherds. Abraham and Jacob both had to do with sheep. Moses was keeping Jethro's flock when God spake in the burning bush. When Samuel came to seek a king, the king, a ruddy lad, was shepherding. Amos the prophet was a simple herdsman. And Jeremiah, likest of all the prophets to the Lord, would seem to have been a shepherd too. Did not Christ know all that? Had He not brooded deep upon these shepherds, as He wandered among the hills of Nazareth? *Now*, at the touch of need, and under the impulse of a great compassion, He glorifies and crowns that ancient image, by making it the express image of Himself.

NOW you will note that Jesus *knows His sheep*. That thought was clearly before the mind of Christ. There was not a Pharisee who knew the blind beggar, although they had passed his begging-place for years. But beggar or prince, it is all one to Jesus; as the Father knows Him, He knows His own. Mr. Moody used to tell about a girl who was very ill, and her mother sang to her and spoke to her and shifted her, but the little patient still tossed and fretted. And then her mother stooped down and took her in her arms, and the child whispered, 'Ah, mother, that's what I want!' You see that even a mother, for all her love, can never be sure what her little girl is wanting. But every want and every need, and every trial and every hope, of every separate boy or girl who trusts Him—it is all known to Jesus. The day is coming when Christ shall say to *some* people, 'Depart from Me, *I never knew you!*' But that same Jesus is saying to-day, 'I am the Good Shepherd and know My sheep.'

NOTE once again that *the sheep know their shepherd*. There is a story of a Scottish traveller in Palestine, who thought he would try an experiment upon the sheep. He had been reading this chapter of St. John, and he was eager to put it to the test. So he got a shepherd to change clothes with him; and the tourist wrapped himself in the shepherd's mantle, and the shepherd donned the tourist's garb, and then both called to the flock of sheep to follow (in the East the shepherd goes before his flock). And the sheep followed the *voice* and not the *dress*. It was the voice and not the dress they knew. So you see that every sheep in the flock has got an *ear-mark*—it can tell the voice of the shepherd from a stranger's. And every sheep in the flock has got a *foot-mark*—they follow the shepherd because they know His voice. Have you been branded on the ear and foot? Are these two marks of ownership on you? Samuel was but a child when he cried out, 'Speak, Lord, Thy servant heareth!' The Shepherd called him and he heard the voice.

AGAIN, observe how *the good shepherd lays His life down for the sheep*. It seems a strange thing for a shepherd to do. We never think of a shepherd as a hero. But in the East there is never a day that dawns but may reveal the hero or the hireling in the shepherd. To-night there may spring a lion on the flock. Or who can tell but that yon swirling dust betokens the galloping of Bedouin sheep-stealers? If that be so—come! trusty blade! it must be battle now! For all my watching and my watering shall be vain, unless I am ready to combat to the death! So is the Eastern shepherd faced with death. Serving amid fierce beasts and fiercer bandits, he may be called to die for his sheep to-night. And I am the Good Shepherd, says Jesus, and the Good Shepherd giveth his life for the sheep. Learn, then, that the Cross is Jesus' noblest deed. It is not an accident, it

is an act. It is the crowning service of the shepherd to the sheep, whom He loves too deeply ever to let them go.

THEN, lastly, mark that *the shepherd has sheep outside our fold*. In the early Church there was a fiery saint, some of whose books our students study yet. And this 'fierce Tertullian,' as one of our poets calls him, said, 'The sheep He saves, the goats He doth not save.' But in the very days when Tertullian was writing, there were humble Christians hiding in the catacombs. And they loved to draw the figure of the Good Shepherd, and many of their rude drawings are there still—and often the Good Shepherd is carrying on His shoulders, not a lamb, but a kid of the goats. To the Jew there was but one fold—it was Israel. Jesus had other sheep outside that fold. And whenever we send a missionary to China, whenever we pray for the savage tribes of Africa, we do it because the Good Shepherd has said this: 'Them also I must bring, and they shall hear My voice, and there shall be one flock and one Shepherd.'

NINETEENTH SUNDAY

Morning

RUTH THE GLEANER

Passage to be read : Ruth ii. 1-23.

THINGS had changed much since Naomi left Bethlehem ten years ago. The old people had died, the children had grown up; it was only now and then that she saw a familiar face passing before the windows of her little home. Times were hard, too. There was no Elimelech now to keep the home provisioned. How were they ever to struggle on until another harvest? It was then that Ruth determined to become a gleaner. It was then she formed the purpose to be the bread-winner for that little cottage. And if we loved Ruth when she cast in her lot with Naomi, I think we shall love her even more now. Do you ever find her fretting and repining? Never. Does she worry Naomi by recalling those fields of Moab where the corn rustled and the sunshine glanced? Never. Had she been mindful of the country out of which she came, *now* had been her opportunity to have returned. But she forgot all that. She steeled her heart like a heroine against the past. She put her pride in her pocket, and humbled herself to glean. Before Ruth's honour was humility. It is true heroism to face the present humbly and bravely. I have known young people whose prospects have been overthrown in a twinkling—some one has died, and everything is changed. *That* is the hour to show the spirit of Ruth;

that hour, cheerfully, strongly taken, may be the beginning of a blessedness like hers.

NAOMI had a kinsman whose name was Boaz, a rich man, and lord of many acres; and when Ruth had kissed her mother, and passed through the gates of Bethlehem out into the fields, she came on his reapers busy at the harvest. Whose reapers they were, *she* did not know. And what it was led her to choose that field, perhaps she never guessed. She did not know that the Lord God of Israel, who girds us when we never dream of it, and guides us when we never guess it, had turned her girlish feet through Boaz's gate. What mighty issues flow from what *we* call chances! How unexpectedly we hap on things—and the future shall never be the same again! It seemed a happy chance that Luther should have found the Bible in the monastery, but it meant life to him, and changed the life of Europe. It seemed a chance that Spurgeon should turn into a half-empty chapel, but it brought him to Christ, and led to the saving of countless souls. And it seemed a chance that Ruth should have chosen Boaz's field, but it wrought out God's wonderful plan for her, and for Jesus. We are not the children of a chance, but of a King.

SO Ruth began to glean, and after gleaning all the morning she was weary, and went to rest in the rude shelter that a kind-hearted master had erected in the field (v. 7). Then Boaz came, and from the kindly greetings between the master and his servants, I could almost be certain Boaz would be kind to Ruth. We sometimes talk of servants as *hands*. We say there are so many *hands* upon the farm. But the blessing of Boaz shows that he thought of their *souls*, and the hands did far better work for him among the barley because he remembered that. Now, some of our boys are going to

be masters. Some of our girls are going to be mistresses, and have domestic servants of their own. Never forget that they are more than *hands*. Never forget to pray for them (by name), and bless them. I think there will be fewer strikes than in your establishment, and fewer changes at the term in your villa. Then Boaz spied the stranger. He recognised the foreigner at once. And when he heard from his steward who she was, and found that this was the maid who had come back with Naomi, and learned how modestly she had behaved herself since she crept timidly into the field at sunrise, then a great wave of pity flowed over Boaz's heart. He was her kin; God helping him, he would be kind.

HOW kind he was to this stranger in the field, every verse of this sweet chapter shows, and if we wish a model of the kindly heart, let us halt at Boaz, and we shall find it there. There is some kindness that is extremely foolish. It is the weak good-nature of a thoughtless heart. It is not just, it is not persevering, it is not the sweet-faced mother of self-denial. *True* kindness is a noble virtue. There is thought, there is strength, there is something of sacrifice, something of God, about it, and as I study this simple record of the kindness of Boaz, I find these marks of true kindness there. Do you see its *thoughtfulness*? Ruth is to go with her own sex to glean. The young men are specially charged to beware of rudeness. Do you note its *pity*? Boaz was kind because he felt it was God's will that the maid who had come under His wings to rest should be favoured so (v. 12). Do you see its *humility and self-forgetfulness*? It was none but the master who reached the parched corn to her—and she a gleaner (v. 14). Do you mark its *inventiveness*? I can see the wonder in the young men's eyes when Boaz whispered to them to drop some handfuls (v. 16). Try to be kind like that. Think shame to let Boaz beat you. Do not be kind with a rush

and a swirl, and then be selfish all the long afternoon. Go at it seriously. Think of it. Invent some sweet surprises for your friend *to-day*. And do all under a sense of the marvellous kindness of that loving God, who sent His only-begotten Son from heaven, to be your Saviour and your kindest friend.

SO Ruth gleaned and was happy, and had such a sackful of corn over her shoulder when she came up the street at sunset, that Naomi could hardly believe her eyes. Now, I have known *some* people, and do you know what their first word would have been to Ruth?—‘Well, whoever he was, I think he might have sent a servant with that sack. It was a shame making a girl like you carry it—and he so rich.’ There are always grumblers—people with a positive genius for picking holes. But Naomi and Ruth were not of that family. They shut the door, and they kissed each other and wept, and they praised God, and they could not sleep that night for thanking and blessing Him for such a perfect gentleman as Boaz. And in the fulness of the time, out of *that* family, Jesus of Nazareth, after the flesh, was born.

NINETEENTH SUNDAY

Evening

THE MISSION OF THE SEVENTY

Passage to be read : Luke x. 1-22.

CAN you picture the distress of a farmer when he sees his fields golden with a harvest, and there are no servants to gather that harvest in? It was such an agony that filled the heart of Jesus as He looked out on *His* harvest-field. The seed had been sown; sunshine and rain had come; by the songs of

psalmists and the message of prophets, by national guidance and national disaster, God had been bringing Israel to its autumn. And now there was the harvest ready to be cut, but the harvesters—where were they? How intensely Jesus felt the need of helpers! How clearly He saw that the world was to be won through the enthusiasm and the effort of humble men! It is one glory of our joyful Gospel that if we *wish* to help, there is a place for us. I have seen boys left out in the cold by their *schoolmates*, but men by their *Master*, never.

WELL, when the work of Jesus in Galilee was over, and a larger field was calling for larger service, Jesus chose seventy, as before He had chosen twelve. Who these seventy were I do not know. We find no list, in the Gospels, of their names. But one thing we are sure of, for we have it from the lips of Christ Himself, their seventy names were all written in heaven (v. 20). One of our sweetest poets, who died in Italy, bade his friend write upon his tombstone, 'Here lies one whose name was writ in water.' But the very feeblest of these seventy, when *he* came to die, would bid men write, 'Here lies one whose name is writ in heaven.' What a debt we owe to the *unnamed* disciples! How we are helped by those we never heard of! If struggles are easier and life is brighter for us, we owe it largely to the faithful souls who pray and work and die, unknown. Do you long to be one of the twelve, till all the land is ringing with your name? Better to be one of the unnamed seventy, who did their work and were very happy in it, and whose names are only known to God. Better: perhaps *safer* too. There was a Judas in the twelve: we never read of one among the seventy.

AND why did Jesus fix on that number seventy. Fine souls have dreamed (and sometimes it is sweet to dream a little) that Jesus was thinking of the twelve

wells and seventy palms of Elim that had refreshed the children of Israel long ago (Exod. xv. 27). But if that be a fancy, this at least is fact. It was seventy elders who went up with Moses to the mount and saw the glory of the God of Israel (Exod. xxiv. 1, 9). *Now* seventy workers are to go out for Jesus, and see a glory greater than that of Sinai. It was seventy elders who were afterwards chosen to strengthen Moses in his stupendous task (Num. xi. 24-5). *Now* seventy are set apart by Jesus to aid Him in His glorious service. Do you see how Jesus gathered up the past? Do you mark how He was guided by the past in making His great choices for *to-day*?

SO the seventy were chosen; and with an exquisite kindness were sent out two and two. They were to heal the sick. They were to be the heralds of God's kingdom. If men received them, let them rejoice. If cities rejected them, let them remember Jesus, for 'he that despiseth you, despiseth Me.' *He* was the Lamb of God, and *they* were sent forth as lambs among the wolves. They were to try to win men, too, by trusting them. For when Jesus bade them leave their wallet and their purse behind, He was not only teaching confidence in God; He was teaching them to look for the best in *man*. That was one secret of the seventy's success. They took it for granted they would be hospitably treated, and men responded to that trustfulness. They honoured that confidence reposed in them; till the hearts of the seventy overflowed with praise, and they came back to Jesus full of joy.

IT should be noted too, in their directions, how Jesus *guarded against all waste of time*. There is a note of urgency we must not miss. The value of precious hours is realised. Take this, for instance, 'Salute no man by the way.' Did Jesus mean that the worker should be a churl? Not that. But in the East greetings are so

tedious, so full of flattery, so certain to lead on to way-side gossip, that men who are out on a work of life and death must run the risk of seeming unsocial sometimes. When Elisha bade his servant carry his staff and lay it on the dead child of the Shunamite, do you remember how he said to him, 'If thou meet any man, salute him not; and if any salute thee answer him not again' (2 Kings iv. 29)? The call was so urgent, there was no time for that, and there is a thousandfold greater urgency here. Or why, again, did Jesus say, 'Go not from house to house'? Did not the disciples break bread from house to house (Acts ii. 46)? Did not Paul at Ephesus teach from house to house (Acts xx. 20)? But what Jesus warned the seventy against was this. It was against accepting that endless hospitality that to this day is the custom in an Eastern village. It was against frittering all their priceless hours away in accepting the little invitations they would get. They must remember how the days were flying. They must never lose sight of their magnificent work. The time is short, and all must give way to this—the preaching of the Kingdom and healing the sick.

THE seventy did their work, then, and came home again (for it was always home where Jesus was); and when Jesus heard their story and saw their joy, there fell a wonderful gladness on *His* heart. This Man of Sorrows was often very joyful, but never more so than in His friends' success. Now is not that a Comrade for us all? Is not that a Companion who will make life rich? We are so ready to envy one another. We cannot hear about a brother's triumphs but it sends a sting into our hearts. Jesus *exults* when His nameless children prosper. He is jubilant, in heaven, when I succeed. It is worth while to master self; it is worth while to be a Christian, in my own nameless way, when I have a Friend like that to please.

TWENTIETH SUNDAY

Morning

THE CAPTURE OF THE ARK

Passage to be read : 1 Sam. iv. 1-18.

WHEN Samuel was growing towards manhood at Shiloh, and when his fame was spreading far and wide, the Philistines, those old and bitter enemies of Israel, were daily growing more irritating and insolent. When we forget God, our spiritual enemies prove doubly strong; and as often as Israel wandered from Jehovah, we find new hope kindling among their foes. Now if Israel had been truly wise and humble, they would have cried to God for help against the Philistines. But I find no word of prayer or sacrifice, and not a whisper of repentance, in the opening verses of our chapter. Had Israel not beaten the Philistines before? Why should they not muster and thrash them once again? So they went out to battle at Eben-ezer, thinking of victory but not of God; and how the battle went our story tells us. They were swept from the field by these fierce Philistines, and there was sore weeping in many a glen that night for these four thousand who lay dead at Aphek.

NOW God has always a purpose in our failures. It is often when we are flying from our foes that we fly most swiftly to the Everlasting Arms. And the children of Israel, corrupted though they were, felt that Jehovah

had been at work at Aphek. It was the Lord who had smitten them before the Philistines, and not the Philistines who had smitten them before the Lord. With the dead yonder, and the wounded here, and the shouts of the victors still ringing from the valley, there fell a new sense of God upon their souls. But where was God? that was the vital question. And how could they bring Jehovah to the camp? Then they remembered the promise of their Lord to dwell between the cherubim that stretched their wings above the ark at Shiloh. Come, then, went up the cry, and let us fetch the ark to Eben-ezer! And when they got it, and Hophni and Phinehas with it, there rose such a shout of enthusiasm in the camp, that even the Philistines guessed their gods had come. 'Woe unto us, who shall deliver us out of the hands of these mighty gods?' they cried; 'these are the gods that smote the Egyptians with all the plagues in the wilderness.'

BUT it is one thing to have a living God, and quite another to have a lifeless ark. And when the morning dawned, and the battle broke out again, the camp of Israel found it had shouted too soon. Somehow, in the cold light of that new day, the noisy enthusiasm of last night had vanished. The Philistines were never fiercer than this morning, for they were fighting with the courage of despair. The ranks of the Israelites wavered and broke. That whirlwind-charge was irresistible. In vain the leaders tried to rally their men. They scattered and fled for their tents, leaving thirty thousand dead upon the field. Worst blow of all, the ark of God was taken—the glory was departed from Israel. And then we read how the news was brought to Eli, and how the old man heard with fortitude of the slaughter of Israel and of the death of his unworthy sons, but fell back from his seat, and died, when he was told of the capture of the ark.

NOW note as the great lesson of this sad episode, *the fatal mistake that Israel made*. Instead of seeking to God Himself, they sent to Shiloh to fetch His ark. They thought that if that chest was in their midst, the God of battles could not be far away. Was it not before the ark that Jordan parted? Had not the walls of Jericho so fallen? *Now*, surely, if the ark was in the camp, there could be no question as to victory. But what they forgot was that the ark was powerless without the invisible presence of the Lord, and the presence of the Lord was never promised to a rebellious and wicked people. If they had turned to God in true repentance, they would have won without an embassy to Shiloh; and embassies to Shiloh were all useless, so long as their hearts were turned away from God. God dwells wherever there is faith and love. He is always present in the camp that trusts Him. When faith is dead, and love has fled away, no ark or cherubim can bring me victory.

I SEE, too, from this passage how *men learn by their losses*. The loss of battles was not so sore to Israel as was the loss of the ark. The ark was linked with their most glorious past; it seemed the centre of their national life. The crown of glory had fallen from Israel's head when the ark was taken captive by the Philistines. Yet it was through the capture of the ark that Israel was led to the feet of God again. It was when the ark was far away that they learned again how near Jehovah was. Who knows, if the ark had never been carried from Shiloh, but that Israel might have swiftly fallen to idolatry? That sacred coffer was so associated with the Lord, that it was always easy to reckon it divine. But now the ark was lost, and God was found. They were cast on the living invisible Jehovah. It was a truth with which Israel was to bless the world, and it was graven on their hearts by this disaster.

AND there is one minor lesson in the story. *We may still triumph where we have been defeated.* For what was the place called where Israel camped? Eben-ezer. And Eben-ezer was the very spot where Samuel won his victory later on. Did Samuel recall these two days of disaster when he erected the stone to commemorate his triumph? His heart may have been flooded with the joy that God can give clear shining after rain. *Here* Israel had fallen because of unbelief. Here Israel conquered, when once more trusting God. And if our want of faith has well-nigh wrecked us, we may return, and on the very scene of our defeats, in His strength, we shall be victorious still.

TWENTIETH SUNDAY

Evening

THE RICH FOOL

Passage to be read: Luke xii. 13-34.

JESUS was often interrupted in His teaching, and some of the choicest sayings in the Gospel spring from these interruptions of the Lord. When we are interrupted at our work or play, you know how cross we generally are. But Jesus, in His perfect trust and wisdom, turned even His interruptions to account. He had to stop preaching at Capernaum once when the paralytic was lowered through the roof. But instead of fretting, He so used the moment, that the crowd in the cottage glorified God. And here, too, as He is teaching, He is brought to a halt by an unlooked-for question. Yet He so answers it, and uses it, and preaches such a memorable sermon on it, that I am sure there was not a disciple but thanked God for that unseemly interruption.

Christ felt that not one man could interrupt Him, without the permission of His heavenly Father. It was that present and perfect trust in God that kept Him in His unutterable calm.

WHILE He was speaking, then, of heavenly things—of forgiveness of sins and of the Holy Ghost—and when He paused, perhaps, for an instant to see if Peter and John had understood Him, there came a grating voice upon His ear, ‘Master, speak to my brother that he divide the inheritance with me.’ Now, whether this man was really wronged or not, it is of course impossible to say. And it was not *that* which stirred the wrath of Jesus—it was the betrayal of the speaker’s heart. A single sentence may be enough to reveal us. A single request may open our inmost soul. And here was a man who had listened to peerless preaching, and might have been carried heavenward on the wings of it, but the moment Jesus stops, he blurts out his petition, and his whole grievance is about his *gear*. Does not that show what he was thinking of? Cannot you follow back the workings of his mind through these magnificent teachings that precede? It was that earthly mind that stirred Christ’s anger. It was that which led Him on to preach on greed. There was life eternal in the words of Christ; but this man, in the very hearing of them, could think of nothing but the family gold.

THEN Jesus told the story of the rich fool, and as He told it His mind went back to Nabal (1 Sam. xxv.). For ‘Nabal’ just means a foolish man, and as his name was, so was he. Like Nabal, too, this churl was not a *bad* man. He had not stolen the wealth that was to wreck him. It was God’s rain that had fallen on his seed. It was God’s sunshine that had ripened his harvest. It was God’s gentleness that made him great. But for all that, his riches ruined him. He gave his heart to

them: he gave his soul. Then suddenly, when he was laying his plans, and dreaming his golden dreams about to-morrow, God whispered, 'Senseless! this night they want thy soul!' Who the *they* is—for so it reads in the original—we cannot say. It may be the angels of death: it may be robbers. In any case it is God's instruments, and the rich man must say good-bye to everything. O folly, never to think of that! He had thought of everything except his God. 'And so is he that layeth up treasure for himself, if he is not rich towards God.'

NOW there are three things we must notice about this man: and the first is how very *anxious* he was. When we are young we think that to be rich means to be free from anxiety altogether. We can understand a pauper being anxious, but not a man who has great heaps of gold. But *this* rich man was just as full of cares as the beggar without a sixpence in the world. He could not sleep for thinking of his crops. That question of the harvest haunted him. It shut out God from him, and every thought of heaven, just as that family inheritance we spoke of silenced the music of Jesus for the questioner. Who is the man whom *we* sometimes call a fool? It is the man with the bee in his bonnet, as we say. But better sometimes to have a bee in the bonnet than to have nothing but barns upon the brain. The fool hath said in his heart, There is no God.

SEE next how very *selfish* the man was. Do we hear one whisper of a harvest-thanksgiving? Is there any word of gratitude to God? You would think the man had fashioned the corn himself, and burnished and filled the ears with his own hand, he is so fond of talking of *my* corn. Do you remember what we learned in the Lord's Prayer? It is never *my* there, it is always *our*. And the Lord's fool is at opposite poles from the Lord's Prayer, for he is always babbling about *my*. And then

were there no poor folk in his glen? Was there no Naomi in yon cottage in the town? Did not one single Ruth come out to glean when the tidings travelled of that amazing harvest? If the bosoms of the poor had been his barns, he would have been welcomed at the Throne that night. O selfish and ungrateful!—but halt, have I been selfish this last week? There are few follies in the whole wide world like the folly of the selfish man.

THEN, lastly, think—and we have partly travelled on this ground already—think how very *foolish* the man was. Had he said, '*Body*, take thine ease, eat, drink, be merry!' there might have been some shadow of reason in it. But to think that a *soul* that hungers after God was ever to be satisfied with food—is there any folly that can equal that? 'The world itself,' says James Renwick, 'could not fill the heart, for the heart has three corners and the world is round!' Let us so live, then, that when *our* soul is summoned, we shall say, 'Yea, Lord! it has long been wanting home.' And to this end let us seek *first* the kingdom. For where our treasure is, there will our heart be also.

TWENTY-FIRST SUNDAY

Morning

SAUL'S VICTORY

Passage to be read : 1 Sam. xi. 1-15.

IN this chapter we are introduced to a scene of border warfare. We are taken from the shouting crowds of Gibeah to the loneliness of an outlying fortress. Jabesh-Gilead lay across the Jordan ; it was exposed to the attacks of these old and bitter enemies of Israel, the Ammonites ; and in the opening of our passage we find it besieged, and very sore bestead, by Nahash, the king of Ammon. So hopeless indeed did things look for Jabesh that the citizens were on the point of yielding, and from this fatal step they were only saved by the barbarity of the terms proposed by Nahash. On one condition only would he make terms with them. They were all to be blinded in their right eyes. And it was on hearing that that the elders of Jabesh pled for a week's respite. Nahash granted it. He deemed it impossible that Israel should rally to the rescue in seven days ; but he had not reckoned with the newly-proclaimed king—he was ignorant that there was a new head and a new heart in Israel. Long before the seven days were over, thanks to the swift resourcefulness of Saul, the Ammonites were flying in disaster, and Jabesh-Gilead was free.

ONE of the first things that strikes us in the story is *how little Nahash knew what he was doing*. He was quite unconscious of the greater wheel within which

his little wheel was circling. Nahash had been a fighter all his life. There were old scores between his tribe and Israel that he had pledged his honour to wipe out. It was along the line of his own kingly purpose that he had marched his armies to the walls of Jabesh. But God had a wider purpose in it all. It was Heaven's opportunity to Saul to reveal the true kingship of his character. It was the hour when God's anointed declared himself king in nature as well as in name. Into that larger purpose of Jehovah this onset of the Ammonites was brought. And Nahash little dreamed in his besieging how surely he was the instrument of the Almighty. We are all instruments in nobler plans than we have thought. Our lives have a larger setting than we guessed. It redeems my present from being quite ignoble when I remember that in the providence of God it is working out issues I am not permitted to discern. In the story of all strong lives, as in this tale of Nahash, we feel how little the man knows what he is doing.

NOTE, too, how this first summons to kingly duty *came to Saul at his day's work*. One would have thought that the anointed king would have said farewell to the labours of the farm. But in the simple spirit of these early days, Saul seems to have gone back to the farm work again. He had been out in the field with the herd all day, we read. He had been ploughing, perhaps. And he is leading his team homewards in the evening, when suddenly there rings on his heart this call of God. I gather from that that the doing of humble duty will never deaden us to the voice of Heaven. I gather that the gate of noblest opportunity opens off the path of lowly tasks. It is not when we idle and dream and dwell on our anointing, that the call to kinglier service ever comes. It is when we yoke the oxen in the morning and determine, God helping us, to plough well to-day.

'I go a-fishing,' said Simon Peter, and it was on that day he saw the risen Lord. 'I go a-ploughing,' said Saul, and that was the evening on which the Spirit of the Lord inspired him.

THREE kingly features in Saul's character stand out pre-eminent in this incident. The first is *his promptitude in action*. As he came wearily home from the field that evening the first sound that fell upon his ear was weeping. The messengers from Jabesh-Gilead had reached Gibeah, and the city was dissolved in tears. Saul saw in a moment it was no time to weep. It was a time to work; it was a time to serve—he acted with a swift decision which was regal. His lowing oxen, who had ploughed for him all day, stood by. There must be no sparing in an hour like this. He hewed them in pieces, sent out the pieces, like a fiery cross, throughout the tribes to summon them, and long before the seven days had fled, a vast army was on the road to relieve Jabesh. Israel instinctively felt that this was their king. It was for a leader who would lead that they were craving. Dissolute, disunited, powerless—there was the dawning of hope in this heroic promptitude.

THEN mark *his generous and forgiving heart*. It is the promise of this golden morning that makes the after-history of Saul so sad. When Saul was proclaimed king, a section of the people had refused to acknowledge him. Now that his kingship was established by victory, it might have seemed fitting to take revenge on these. That was the view the people took of it; they began to clamour for the death of the malcontents. But in his victory Saul is every inch a king. He refuses to sully his triumph with revenge. 'There shall not a man be put to death to-day, for to-day the Lord had wrought salvation in Israel.'

LASTLY, observe *Saul's true humility*. There is not a touch of pride about this story. From the hour when he comes homeward from the field to the hour of rejoicing and sacrifice at Gilgal, Saul's conduct is noble in its true humility. It is he who sends abroad the fiery cross; but he couples the name of Samuel with his own. It is he who directs the battle against Nahash; but he gives all the praise of the victory to God. Self is still low and God still high with Saul, and that is the secret of genuine humility. Saul did not shirk this sudden call to leadership. It is never true humility to do that. But in all he was called to he saw God so clearly, that there was no room at all in his heart for pride.

TWENTY-FIRST SUNDAY

Evening

THE GREAT SUPPER

Passage to be read: Luke xiv. 15-24.

AT the table of the chief Pharisee, where Jesus was reclining when He spoke this parable, the guests were almost without exception His enemies in disguise. But there was one man among them who was favourably inclined to Jesus. He had been impressed, spite of his prejudices, by the lofty teaching of the young prophet. So strong, indeed, had the impression been that to the great amazement of his fellow-guests he cried out, when Jesus had finished speaking, 'Blessed is he that shall eat bread in the kingdom of God.' Now there can be no doubt that the speaker was blessing himself. It never occurred to him to question for a moment that he would share in the feasting of the kingdom. Christ

therefore turns to *him*, and addresses to him the parable of the Great Supper. It was meant to rouse that guest out of his self-complacency. It comes with the same message to you and me. There are few perils so great and so unnoticed as the peril of the neglected invitation.

A CERTAIN man, then, said our Lord, made a great supper. He sent his invitations for it freely. And when the table was served, and everything was ready, he despatched his servant with a courteous reminder, in accordance with an old custom of the East (Prov. ix. 3), which, as the travellers tell us, has not yet quite died out. But with one voice all the guests begged off. They were all busy—might they not be excused? And there was nothing for it but for the servant to go home again, and tell his master that they refused to come. Then the master was angry at his slighted welcome, for he saw clearly what the excuses implied. So he sent out his servant into the streets and lanes, and bade call in the poor and the blind and the lame, and we know that in the streets of Eastern cities a man does not walk far to light on these. It was done quickly; so quickly indeed that some would have it that the servant had anticipated his master's wish. But even yet, so spacious was the chamber, the places at the table were not all full. 'Away then, out through the city gates!' cries out the host. 'Away to the country roads, and to the hedge-banks, and compel the waifs and the vagrants to come in.' And I dare say the servant, looking through the hedges, saw the first guest, who had excused himself, strutting and fussing in his new piece of ground. But the house of the entertainer was filled at last. The door was shut, and the glad feast began. I wonder if the man who sat at the table with Jesus, and to whom this wonderful parable was spoken—I wonder if he was as ready *now* with his self-satisfied ejaculation, 'Blessed is he that shall eat bread in the kingdom of God.'

NOTE first that the kingdom of God is described as a *supper*. That is the figure Christ chooses for it here. Now it is, of course, quite true that supper is an evening meal—it is the last meal of the day. And some have thought there was a hint in that of the final nature of the Gospel-call: as if God, who had fed the world with many an earlier banquet, closed His provision for the world's day with Jesus. But it is better and safer to remember that this meal called supper was the principal meal. It was the chief hour for appeasing hunger; it was the chosen time of fellowship and rest. And all these features of the supper-table, idealised long since in psalm and prophecy, made it very expressive, for our Lord, of the rich and varied blessings of His kingdom. Had not He come to satisfy men's cravings; to bring them to a knowledge of His Father? Had He not said, 'Come unto Me and I will give you *rest*'? Was He not often speaking of His joy? It was such things that were symbolised for Christ under this figure of the Gospel supper. Neither the mustard-seed nor yet the hidden treasure more truly and fully conveyed the message of God's grace, than did the great supper of our parable.

NEXT note the *excuses* of the invited guests, and see first the points in which they differ. The first had bought a piece of ground—it was pride in what he possessed that kept him back. The second wanted to prove his yoke of oxen—it was the cares and the worries of his work that filled him. And the third had married a wife (and he was the only one who was uncivil: he had lost his manners since his marriage)—it was the ties and claims of home that hindered *him*. The guests all differed in their excuses, then, as men do still when they make light of the invitations of the Gospel. But at some points they all agreed, and we must note at least two of these. Firstly, not one of them was kept away by occupations *sinful in themselves*. Secondly, the root of the whole

matter was *indifference*: had they cared enough, they could all have gone. There was nothing sinful in buying a piece of ground. There was no harm in proving a yoke of oxen. But things that are quite lawful in their own place prove hindrances and offences in the first; and it was into the *first* place that these things had crept, with the men who all began to make excuse. Are you so busy and glad with other things that you are really indifferent to God? Is your whole day a silent prayer to God to have you excused from accepting His calls? God grant it be not so. Keep Christ in His own place—and His place is the first.'

I WANT you, lastly, to observe *how the circle of the invitation widens*. There are first of all the duly invited guests. They had a long invitation to the supper, and when all things were ready they got another bidding. Then they refused, and the invitation widens; it extends through the lanes and streets of the town. But still the servant is within the walls; he has received no mandate to go through the gates. There may be many a hungry gipsy by the hedge, but no glad word of welcome reaches him. Then comes the last great widening of the circle, consequent upon the servant's word, 'yet there is room.' And away beyond the towers of the city, in the lawless and dangerous and beautiful environs of it, there is given the strange calling to the feast. So is it with the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. He came unto His own, and they received Him not; the guardians of the people's faith rejected Him; so He went to the lost sheep of the house of Israel, to the lanes and the streets of the old city of God. But the day was coming when an ascended Saviour was to say to His disciples, 'Go ye into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature,' and in that day it is our joy to live. Every preacher who tells of a crucified Lord, and every missionary who in the zeal of love uplifts the cross in the far and darkened countries, does so because the Master has said to him, 'Compel them to come in.'

TWENTY-SECOND SUNDAY

Morning

DAVID AND GOLIATH

Passage to be read : 1 Sam. xvii. 32-54.

WHEN this crisis in his life occurred, David was some eighteen or twenty years of age. The Philistines, anxious to avenge their late disasters, had invaded Judah, and now in the valley of Elah the two camps lay facing one another. It was not unusual, in ancient warfare, for battles to be decided by challenge and single combat. The boys who are reading Homer in school will remember how Paris offered to fight with Menelaus. They will remember, too, from the first book of Livy, how the Horatii and the Curiatii made the fate of their countries hang on the issue of their battle. In the same way the Philistines staked everything on the prowess of their great champion Goliath. Goliath probably was of the stock of the Anakim—men of gigantic stature—who had been driven out of their haunts by Joshua and had been forced to take refuge with the Philistines (Josh. xi. 21-2); and according to Jewish tradition it was he who had slain Hophni and Phinehas, and had taken captive the ark of God. Well might the Israelites tremble day by day as they heard the shouted challenge in the valley. Well might they wonder when the news ran through the camp that a lad from Bethlehem was going out to fight. There had been gallant achievements wrought in Israel, but never a venture quite so bold as this. But the battle was the

Lord's and we know the issue. The stripling was victorious; the giant fell. And surely, in the strong music of many a psalm, we catch some echo of that decisive hour—

‘Behold on those that do Him fear
The Lord doth set His eye;
Ev'n those that on His mercy do
With confidence rely.’

NOTE first that *the memory of past help made David strong*. Our memories can do much to make or mar us. They can almost make cowards or heroes of us all. And it is in the great hours of our career, when we are called to act or to decide, that memory wakes in her strange power to help us upward or to keep us back. If I have acted unworthily a score of times, what a dead-weight is that memory of failure when at last I resolve to rise and play the man. But on the other hand there is nothing which can so cheer me, as the bright memory of bygone succour. Well, it was that heartening which David had. From the bear and the lion the Lord had delivered him. And David had so dwelt on these deliverances, as he herded his sheep among the lonely hills, that his trust in God had grown into a passion. The power that freed him from the lion's paw would never fail him when he faced the giant. He had been signally helped upon the hills, and he would not be deserted in the valley. And there was such a note of triumph about him, when he recounted to Saul these past deliverances, that Saul could say nothing to the lad save ‘Go, and the Lord be with thee.’ Have you no memories like that of David? Has God never freed *you* in an hour of need? Cherish the thought of it as David did; be sure it will be wanted by and by. Some day you will be face to face with your Goliath, some day for *you* there will be a giant to fight, and it will fortify and garrison your heart to have remembrances of help from God.

NEXT, mark *the apparent odds against David*. Goliath had been a warrior from his youth; David was a stranger in the camp. Goliath was a giant—he was almost ten feet high; David was a lad. Goliath was helmeted, and in a coat of mail, by his side there hung a sword, there was a javelin across his back, and he carried a mighty spear in his hand. Before him, too there went a servant carrying a shield, and the shield was bigger than the whole of David! I think we might range through all the stories of chivalry and nowhere discover such an unequal combat. It seemed to the giant like a bitter insult. Yet spite of the tremendous odds against David, we know who conquered before the day was done. Now I can never think of that exploit of David's without recalling the triumphs of the *Gospel*. It was to a battle just as unequal that the Gospel of Jesus Christ went forth. Like a great giant, clad in the cunningest armour, the Roman world defied the power of Jesus; but as with David, the battle was the Lord's, and we know it was not Rome that won the day. All which should teach us not to war by *sight*, and never to rate our prospects by the *eye*. If God be for us, we have a mighty ally; even Goliath is not so strong as that.

SEE next how *David won with most unlikely weapons*. Had he taken the helmet and the sword of Saul, the men of Israel would have had some hope. Who knew what virtue there might not be in the consecrated armour of the king? But the helmet smothered him, David was ill at ease. The coat of mail was like chains to the lithe shepherd. He had worn no breastplate when the lion sprang, and he wanted none to meet the Philistine. Give him his sling again, he could use *that!* Better a well-used sling than an ill-used sword. And though all the camp fell a-jesting at his choice, and thought the last hope was gone, David *would* fight with his unlikely

weapons. Now, tell me, are not all the battles of the Lord fought so? Did you ever hear of one true struggle for God that was waged with the common armour of the world? It is the base things of the world, and things that are despised, with which God brings to naught the things that are (1 Cor. i. 28). Mohammed took the *sword* when he went out. But Jesus took *the foolishness of preaching*. And by *that* sling and stone, which men would ridicule, great David's greater Son has won the day.

NOTE, lastly, *the ease and thoroughness of David's victory*. How many stones did he gather from the brook? Five. But the first of the five did all that was necessary. How many Philistines did he go out to fight? One. Yet, when that one was slain, thousands began to fly. There is an ease and thoroughness in David's triumph that bespeak the working of Almighty God. Let us remember that that same God fights for us. He does far *more* than we can ask or think. I should not wonder if Paul was thinking of David when he said of you and me and every struggling Christian that we are more than conquerors through Him that loved us (Rom. viii. 37).

TWENTY-SECOND SUNDAY

Evening

THE LOST SHEEP AND THE LOST COIN

Passage to be read : Luke xv. 1-10.

IN the Catacombs at Rome there is no more familiar painting than that of the Good Shepherd with the straying sheep. Sometimes the other sheep are at His feet, gazing up at Him and at His burden; some-

times He is pourtrayed as sitting down, wearied with His long and painful journey; but always there is a great gladness in the picture, for the painter had felt, in all its morning freshness, the wonder of the seeking love of God. I trust we shall never lose that sense of wonder. 'Let men say what they will,' wrote Pascal, 'I must avow there is something astonishing in the Christian religion.' And there is nothing in it more astonishing than this, that God should have come to seek and save the lost. It is that glad news which lights up all our lesson. It is that truth which, like some strain of unexpected music, makes these two parables a joy for ever. We shall never know, till all the books are opened, how much sinful and despairing men have owed to the story of the lost sheep and the lost coin.

NOW as we read these two parables together, one of the first things to arrest us powerfully is *the worth of single souls*. It was one sheep the shepherd went to find. It was for one coin the woman searched the house. If a score, say, of the flock had gone amissing, we could better understand the shepherd's action. And we might excuse the bustle and the dust, if five of the ten coins had rolled away. The strange thing is that with ninety and nine sheep safe, the shepherd should break his heart about the one. The wonder is that for one little coin there should be such a hunt and such a happiness. It speaks to us of the worth of single souls. It tells us of the great concern of God for the recovery of individual men. We are all separated out, and separately loved, by Him who counteth the number of the stars. I have looked sometimes at the lights of a great city, and tried to distinguish one lamp here and there; and I have thought what a perfect knowledge that would be, if a man could discriminate each separate light. But God distinguishes each separate heart. He knows and loves and seeks them one by one. And I can never feel lost in

the totality, when I have mastered the chapter for to-day. I am not one of many with the Master. With Him, souls are not reckoned by the score. I stand alone. He has a hundred sheep to tend, I know it; yet somehow all His heart is given to me.

✓ **A** GAIN this truth shines brightly in these parables: *no toil or pains are grudged to win the lost.* When the shepherd started after his straying sheep, he knew quite well it was a dangerous errand. He was going to face the perils of the desert, and he took his life in his hand in doing that. True, he was armed; but if a band of robbers intercepted him, what chance had one man of coming off the victor? And who could tell what ravenous beasts lay couched between the shepherd and his vagrant charge? A hireling would never have ventured on the quest. He would have said, 'There is a lion in the way.' But *this* shepherd was not to be deterred; he risked all danger; nothing would keep him back, if only he might find and save the lost. The woman, too, was thoroughly in earnest. She spared no pains to get her piece of silver. She lit her candle and she swept the house, till the whole household grumbled at the dust, and charged her not to fuss about a trifle. But the trifle was no trifle to her; and she persisted and swept until she found. Do you not see what that is meant to teach us? God spares no pain or toils to win the lost. Do you not see where all that is interpreted? It is in the life of our Lord Jesus Christ. He, like the woman, was passionately earnest, till all His household—His own: the Jewish people—murmured at Him in their hearts and hated Him. And He, like the shepherd, ventured on every danger, and for His sheep's sake, took the road to Calvary. No pains, no sorrows, were ever grudged by Him who came into the wilderness to save; and He has left us an example, that we should follow in His steps.

I WANT you, too, to mark this in our lesson: *there is loss in the house as well as in the desert.* It was in the wilderness that the sheep was lost. It was far from the fold with its protecting wall. But the coin was not lost in any wilderness—it had not even rolled into the street. It was still in the house; it was within the walls; it was lying somewhere on the dusty floor. So there are multitudes of men lost in heathendom; lost to the joy of the Gospel and the hopes of God in the far countries where Christ was never known. But are there not multitudes who, like the piece of silver, stamped with God's image, coined for useful service, are lying lost and useless in the house? They have been born and nurtured in a Christian country, they are encircled by Christian care and love, they are within the walls of the church visible, they have heard from childhood the message of the Gospel; yet they have never yielded their lives to the Redeemer; within the walls of the homestead they are lost. Are there no lost coins, think you, in your home? Give God no rest till by the light of His Spirit they are found.

NOTE, lastly, in a word, this joyful truth: *the sheep, when found, was carried by the shepherd.* He did not drive it before him to the flock. He did not commit it to the charge of any underling. He laid it rejoicingly on his own shoulders, and on his own shoulders bore it home. When the *coin* was found it was restored to service; it became useful for the woman's need. But when the *sheep* was found it was upheld in the strong arm of the shepherd, till the perils of the desert were no more. So every one who is saved by Jesus Christ is saved to be of service to his Lord. There is some little work for him to do, just as there was for this little piece of silver. But he is not only found that he may serve. He shall be kept and carried like the sheep. He shall find himself

borne homeward by a love that is far too strong ever to let him go. It is only when we are leaning upon Christ that we are able to win heavenward at all. He alone keeps us from falling, and can present us faultless before the presence of God's glory, with exceeding joy.

TWENTY-THIRD SUNDAY

Morning

DAVID AND JONATHAN

Passage to be read : 1 Sam. xx. 1-23.

THERE are few friendships that have so deeply impressed the world as that of David and Jonathan. Through the storm and darkness of the sad history of Saul it shines like a bright star on a cloudy midnight. The world has had many famous friendships. There was that of Damon and Pythias, for example, when Damon was ready and indeed eager to die for Pythias. There was that, too, of Pylades and Orestes, of which we read in the works of the great Greek dramatists. Nor must we forget the most wonderful friendship of all—that between Jesus and the beloved disciple. Well, the friendship of David and Jonathan takes rank with these. It is one of the great friendships of the world ; and (with the exception of that between John and Jesus) it has influenced the world more powerfully than any of the others, just because the record of it is embalmed in a Book that has a world-wide circulation. Do you know who it was that when asked the secret of his life, answered, '*I had a friend*'? I think had we asked David or Jonathan that question, they might have given a similar reply. Now one of the pleasant pictures of that friendship is before us in our passage for to-day. God grant to every one of us some experience of a strong and helpful comradeship.

WELL, I want you first to notice *how unselfish it was*. There is a great deal that tricks itself out as friendship that is really selfishness in disguise. We show ourselves friendly, and are accepted as such, but our eye is on our own interests all the time. And this is true not only of men and women who are out in the rush and struggle of the world's life, it is just as true of our children in the nursery and of our boys and girls in school. But in true friendship, whether of men or children, there is something disinterested, something unexplainable; and in no historical friendship is this so marked as in the friendship of Jonathan and David. Do you remember when it began? It began when David returned from slaying Goliath (xviii. 1). And I think that had *I* been there instead of Jonathan, I should have sorely grudged the shepherd lad his triumph. Had Jonathan never dreamed of fighting Goliath? Had he never thought how glorious it would be if *he* could be the conqueror of the giant? Yet when a young man like himself achieved the task, and all the camp of Israel rang with it, was Jonathan envious, jealous, discontented?—he grappled him to his soul with hoops of steel. Remember, too, that Jonathan was heir-apparent, and David had been anointed king by Samuel. The kingdom was to be taken from the house of Saul and given to the house of David. Yet even when Jonathan learned all that, it did not destroy this so unselfish friendship: 'Thou shalt be king over Israel, and I shall be next unto thee,' he said (xxiii. 17). This, then, distinguishes that classic friendship. It 'smote the chord of Self, that, trembling, pass'd in music out of sight.' And it is this that made it hardy to survive the changes and the shocks of coming days.

A GAIN, I want you to observe *how inventive it was*. In all true friendship, as in all true faith, there is a sweet element of originality. I suppose it is because the *heart* is engaged in both, that in both there is a kind of

defiance of the stereotyped. Mock-friendships, in which the interests of self are dominant, are always content to move along the beaten track. But you never can tell across what virgin meadows, and up the side of what untrodden hills, the feet of true heart-friendship are going to carry it. It is never content with the routine of service. It has an inventive genius of its own. It is swift to help in a hundred little ways that none but a friendly heart would ever dream of. And I think that that pleasant feature of a rich inventiveness was never more marked in any friendship than in that of Jonathan and David. Just take the instance in our chapter for to-day. Just read that story of the arrow-flight again. There is more in that than a devising *brain*. There is the record in it of a devising *heart*—and that is one of the best fruits of friendship, which, like the pomegranate, says Bacon in his Essay, is full of many kernels. It helps us, as with a happy instinct, in those seasons when we cannot help ourselves. *Hast* thou a friend? Trust him and take his counsel. *Art* thou a friend? Let it be known by unexpected services. It is this that has always marked the world's great friendships, and separated them out from duller unions.

AND then I ask you to note *how enduring it was*. It was like the friendship of Jesus for His own; it lasted, through storm and strain, right to the end. Can you recall any great instances of broken friendship? There are not a few narrated in our histories. There is that between Pope Innocent the Third and Otho, for instance; 'the imperial crown was on the head of Otho, and almost from that moment the Emperor and the Pope were implacable enemies' (Milman, v. 234). And there was that between Queen Elizabeth and Essex, which ended, for the gay Earl, upon the block. But the friendship of Jonathan and David never broke. No jeopardy, no change of place or circumstance impaired it. And

'when the arrow of the Philistine,' says Mr. Spurgeon, 'went through the heart of Jonathan on Mount Gilboa, it struck the name of David that was engraven there.'

' God keeps a niche
 In heaven to hold our idols ! and albeit
 He break them to our faces, and denied
 That our close kisses should impair their white,
 I know we shall behold them raised, complete—
 The dust shook from their beauty—glorified,
 New Memnon's singing in the great God-Light.'

TWENTY-THIRD SUNDAY

Evening

THE PRODIGAL SON

Passage to be read : Luke xv. 11-32.

A FRIEND of mine was on one occasion visiting one of our seaport hospitals. It chanced that at the time of her visit two Russian sailors were lying ill there ; both of them rough, wild men who had led a wandering and riotous life. With a silent prayer to God that He would guide her to some suitable passage of Scripture, she read to them the parable of the Prodigal Son. And great was her wonder when she looked up from her book, and saw tears streaming down the sailors' checks. They had never heard the parable before. It broke on them freshly, with its matchless music. It touched some of these secret chords that had lain silent through many a sinful year. And my friend used to say that she never realised the reach and the tenderness of Jesus' words, till she read them, without note or comment in that ward. Is there no danger in a too familiar Bible? Have we not read and read again

such passages as these, till we have almost ceased to feel the wonder of them? It is a heavenly mind, said Thomas Boston, that is the best interpreter of Scripture.

NOW first let us note *how self-will leads to misery.* ✓

Like many another child of other countries, this younger son chafed at the bonds of home. He wanted to live; he wanted to see the world; it was intolerable for a young fellow like him to be pent up in that lonely farm. His heart was away, long before he left. He had really wandered before he ever set out. So he came to his father and he got his portion; and without a thought of the sore hearts at home, he started lightly for the far country. I daresay the sun had never shone so brightly, and the world was never so magical, so intoxicating, as on that morning when he left the farm. *Now* he had burst the shackles, now he was going to be free—and before long, instead of being free, he found that he had made himself a slave! It was a sweet slavery for a little while; but the sweetness passed and the degradation came. Then (for troubles never come singly) there broke out a great famine in the land, until at last there was nothing left for him but to take service with some citizen and feed his swine—and you know what degradation *that* was for a Jew. It was to this that his self-will had brought him. He longed to be free, and he was free to starve. It was a strangely different world, out with the swine, from the world that had danced before him when he started—and he had no one to blame for it except himself. He had been self-willed, and now he was self-made. There was a way that had seemed right in the man's eyes, and he was finding that its end was death.

✓
AGAIN mark that *it was the prodigal's want that turned his heart homeward.* In his days of pleasure he had forgotten his home. Life sped so merrily when money was plentiful, that he hardly ever gave a thought to his

father. And had his portion only lasted long enough, he might have been forgetful till he died. But the day came when he began to be in want, and on the back of his hunger memory revived. He had never known the value of his home till he was homeless in a stranger's field. But he knew it then; he saw it clearly then. His need set everything in its true light. And then urged by his destitution, and spurred by these happy visions of love and plenty, he was thrilled by the strong purpose to return. Had he sat still and only dreamed of home, he would have been the victim of remorse. When he rose up and started out for home he was the subject of genuine repentance. For repentance, says the catechism, is a saving grace, whereby a sinner out of a true sense of his sin, and apprehension of the mercy of God in Christ doth, with grief and hatred of his sin, turn from it unto God, with full purpose of, and endeavour after, new obedience.

THEN note *how strong and deep the father's love was.* The prodigal had well-nigh forgotten his father, but the father had never forgotten his younger son. He never waked in the morning but it flashed on him that perhaps the wanderer would come home to-day. His heart had given a strange leap many a time when he spied a distant figure on the downs. But always it was another disappointment—and a stronger entreaty arose in the evening prayer. But *to-day* there was no disappointment. However ragged and haggard and wayworn, he would have recognised that figure in a thousand. They say that love is blind, but the love of the prodigal's father was not so. His love, then, was unchanging, ever watchful; but it was more, it was generous, royal, forgiving. There is the kiss of peace; there is the noble welcome; there is never a whisper of 'I told you so.' I think that if the elder brother had met the prodigal, he would have sneaked him round and in by the back door. But the

love of the father wishes no concealment; the whole house must be sharers in the joy. Is not that worthy of the name of love? Do you not say such love is wonderful? Yet that is the picture of the love of God when He pardons and welcomes and blesses you and me.

NOTE lastly *how unbrotherly the elder brother was.*

He was almost unworthy to have such a father. He took the feasting as a personal insult: he cannot call him brother—'this thy son.' You might have thought he would have been glad to get him home. Instead of that he was angry at the welcome. And he who loveth not his brother whom he *hath* seen, how shall he love God whom he hath not seen? The younger brother had been selfish once; but the elder brother was selfish all along. The younger brother had a broken heart; the elder brother knew not his need of one. The younger brother, through bitterness and famine, had realised the priceless worth of love; but the elder brother, with everything he wanted, was loveless still. God keep us from that narrow and nasty spirit! May we all grow brotherly, and never elder-brotherly. And we shall never do that if in every evening prayer, amid all the joy and thanksgiving of grateful hearts, we whisper seriously, 'Father, *I* have sinned, and am no more worthy to be called Thy son.'

TWENTY-FOURTH SUNDAY

Morning

DAVID AND SAUL

Passage to be read : 1 Sam. xxiv. 1-22.

DAVID and his band were wandering among the high cliffs that look down on the Dead Sea, when this most touching incident occurred. In the limestone crags of the district there are many caves, some of them ample enough in their recesses to shelter large bodies of men. A traveller indeed tells us that in one of them, which lies some twenty miles from En-gedi, no fewer than thirty thousand people once hid themselves to escape the suffocating blast of the simoom. To this day, too, around the mouth of these caves, hundreds of the sheepcotes mentioned in the chapter may be seen. Loose stones are piled up around the entrance of the cave till a rough wall is formed in a semicircle; this is then covered with thorns as a protection against marauders and wild beasts, and during times of storm, or by night, the sheep find safe housing in the cavern. It has been noted, further, that these caverns are dark as midnight. One can see *outward* clearly, but to see four paces *inward* is impossible, and all that must be borne in mind if we would wish to realise our chapter. Let the young folk, also, be interested in En-gedi—the old Hazezon-tamar where the Amorites dwelt (Gen. xiv. 7). I wonder if they could find the verse which says, ‘My beloved is unto me as a cluster of samphire in the vineyards of En-

gedi.' And though there are no vines at En-gedi now, I have read that in the stirring times of the Crusades, the best vineyards in Palestine were found there. Such is the scene and setting of this peerless incident.

IN this neighbourhood, then, Saul is pursuing David, guided by the highlanders from Ziph (xxiii. 19). And one day, tired with his morning's march in the rough country, the king withdraws for a short rest in one of the dark caves on the hill-side. There he lies down to sleep, with his royal cloak lightly thrown across his feet, and he little dreams that in the side-hollows and chambers of his resting-place David and his men are hidden. There is no mistaking the rank of the intruder. His towering height would betray him in an instant, if his jewelled armour and the deference of his retinue failed to do it. The sleeper is Saul. God has delivered the arch-enemy into the hands of justice. There runs a whisper through the dark vaults and passages that the great hour of David's life is come—and perhaps for a moment David thinks the same. One stroke with Goliath's sword—and he is king. But a glance at the sleeper's face revives the past, obliterates the bitter memories of wrong, recalls the hour when he first stood, a ruddy shepherd-lad, in the presence of the Lord's anointed. He cannot kill him. His tender and gallant heart forbids the murder. 'The Lord forbid that I should do this thing unto my master, the Lord's anointed.' Then he stoops down, over the heart that hates him so, and with a deft stroke severs the golden fringe of the royal cloak. What means that stirring and quick breathing round the cave? It is David's followers eager to rise and slay. But David stays them—crushes them down, the word is; and Saul rises up out of the cave and goes his way. David was never more truly a king than when he refused, in En-gedi, to grasp the crown. And then how David goes out and cries on Saul,

and how Saul's heart is moved, even to tears—all that forms the unequalled close of an unequalled chapter.

NOW there are three great lessons for us here, and the first is *the unexpectedness of temptation*. I am certain that when David rose that morning he little thought what midday had in store for him. If you had told him that before the sun had westered, the life of Saul would be lying at his mercy, he would have held it as an idle tale. Swiftly and unexpectedly, without a hint or warning of any kind, he was face to face with terrible temptation; and it is one of the great devices of the tempter still, that he tries to take us captive by surprise. Drummond tells how once he was present at a students' duel in Germany, and he observed that one of the two combatants had only a single form of stroke—downwards from the head. But suddenly, at the thirteenth round, his eye flashed, and with a rapid movement he changed his stroke, and brought his sword upwards, cleaving the chin of his opponent. How did it happen? It was the sudden change of direction; and temptation veers unexpectedly like that.

THE next lesson is that *near cuts are not God's*. David had been anointed by Samuel and had received the promise of the kingdom. You can understand then what a short and certain road to sovereignty offered itself to him as he stooped down over the sleeping king. But David felt (and I think he was the only one in the cave who felt it) that *that* road was not a highway of Jehovah. Such near cuts to his destiny were not of God. Do you not think that our Lord felt that too? It was a short and easy way to universal kingship that Satan offered Him, when he showed Him all the kingdoms of the world. But Jesus, whose glorious destiny *was* to be universal king, scorned, as a temptation, that near road, and took the long and sorrowful way to it by Calvary.

And we are tempted in the same way still. When we think we can attain to Christian character without the steady growth and progress of the years; or when in place of dogged and patient work we fancy there is some easy way to knowledge; or when we begin to dream of growing quickly rich, or very famous—*then* let us think of David and of Jesus, and remember that such near cuts are not God's.

THEN lastly, let us find in this chapter one of the noblest instances in history of *the return of good for evil*. Let us recall how Saul had treated David, and contrast it with David's conduct in the cave, and we shall feel that if ever the spirit of Jesus was at work in the old world, it was in the cave of En-gedi that hour. Is there no such hour for us?

'When deep within our swelling hearts
The thoughts of pride and anger rise,
When bitter words are on our tongues
And tears of passion in our eyes,

Then we may stay the angry blow,
Then we may check the hasty word,
Give gentle answers back again,
And fight a battle for our Lord.'

TWENTY-FOURTH SUNDAY

Evening

THE RICH MAN AND LAZARUS

Passage to be read : Luke xvi. 19-31.

OUR Lord had been speaking against the sin of covetousness, when the Pharisees, who were themselves lovers of money (v. 14), began to ridicule Him. In these circumstances the parable was spoken; it

was meant to enforce the warnings against mammon (v. 13). And there is something highly significant in the unexpected turn that the enforcing takes. Between the typical Pharisee and this rich man there was little *outward* resemblance. The bitterest enemy could not accuse the Pharisees of faring sumptuously every day. Whatever their faults were, they were austere and rigid. They honestly despised luxurious living. Yet in drawing this picture of a luxurious liver, there is no doubt that Jesus was thinking first of *them*. Now, where lay the point of contact, do you think? It lay in a common love of money. The Pharisee loved it, and he secretly hoarded it. The rich man loved it for the pleasure it bought. Each showed his passion for wealth in his own way, but the same passion was supreme in both. Learn, then, how one deep-seated vice may trick itself out in the most diverse garbs. A hundred miles may separate two rivers, but for all that, they flow from the one loch. *Our* eyes might fail to discover kinship between the secret hoarding of the Pharisee and the prodigal squandering of this rich man; but in the eyes of Christ, both ran down to a common selfishness, and to a common heart-neglect of God.

FIRST note *the strange contrasts of the world*. Here are two men, and day after day there is not the space of twenty yards between them, yet a distance like the sea divides the two. The one is rich, the other is a beggar. The one has every dainty on his table, the other gathers the crumbs to stay his hunger. The one is clothed in the fine linen of Egypt, a robe of which was worth twice its weight in gold; the other on the doorstep is in rags. The one has servants to do his smallest bidding, they are fanning him in the long hot afternoon to drive away the flies; the other has no one to drive away the dogs when they gather round him and lick his sores with their unclean tongues. It were impossible to

conceive a greater contrast—and there is only a porch and a door between the two! Yet with such contrasts all the world is teeming. Do you live in a roomy terrace in a great city? There is want and misery within a stone's-throw. Is your home a little villa in some quiet town? Learn something of that lane that you pass on Sundays going to the church. Are you a farmer's daughter? Who was that tramp that the dog barked off to-day? 'The poor ye have *always* with you,' said the Lord; wherever you are, there is a Lazarus near.

AGAIN observe, and do it seriously and often—observe *the changed conditions of eternity*. A great philosopher has written in his books that we should view all things *sub specie æternitatis*. The boys who are learning Latin will tell us what that means: it means that we ought to consider things under the light, so to speak, of eternity. Now, I feel that it was under that eternal light that Jesus was moving when He spoke this parable. And why? Because we are told the beggar's name, but we are *not* told the name of the rich man. When a great man gives a public banquet, the newspapers tell us all about it. We get the names of the host and of all his guests, and we hear, too, how the ladies were dressed; but we never dream of finding in the newspaper the names and addresses of the poor around the gates. But when Jesus tells the story of this feasting, and tells it as it is written in the books of God, the beggar is named—and a noble name he had—and the host is only 'a certain rich man.' *Here* the one man is great and he is known; the other is a beggar and a nuisance. *Here* the one man has everything he wants; the other lives and dies in want of everything. But *yonder*, in the world beyond the grave, where the wrong is righted, and God's strange ways are justified, Lazarus lies upon the bosom of peace, and the rich man bitterly reaps what he has sown. Do you see the contrast between the *now* and *then*? Do you

mark the complete reversal of the lots? It is by such unveilings of eternity, that Christ has eased the problems of the world.

NEXT mark that *the sin of the rich man was selfishness*. There was nothing sinful in his being rich—Abraham himself had been a wealthy man. It is not hinted that the rich man of the story had made his money in unlawful ways. He is not charged with oppression of the poor, nor with enriching himself by others' ruin. Had you asked his boon-companions what they thought of him, they would have called him the finest fellow in the town. It was neglected Lazarus that was his sin. His crime was the unrelieved beggar at his gate. And he could not plead that he was ignorant of Lazarus, for he recognised him at once in Abraham's bosom. It was not want of *knowledge*, then, but want of *thought* that was the innermost secret of his tragedy. He was so engrossed in his own life of pleasure, that his heart was dulled to the suffering at his door; and every day he lived he grew *more* selfish till at last he went to his own place. Let the children learn how needful it is to begin doing kindly deeds when they are young. We grow so accustomed to misery by and by, that our hearts turn callous before we are aware. It is a priceless blessing when the sympathies of childhood are turned into the channel of activity. Caught in their freshness, and expressed in deeds, they form those habits of help and brotherly kindness that were utterly wanting in this rich man's heart.

MARK, lastly, in a word, *it will never be easier to believe than now* (vs. 27-31). Did you ever read of a boy who stood on a muddy road, and who promised God that he would be a Christian if there and then God would dry up the puddles? He wanted a *miracle* to make him a believer; he thought he would become Christ's if

he got that. Jesus here tells us that is a great mistake. It will never be easier to believe than now. The man who is not persuaded by the Gospel will never be persuaded by a ghost. Let no one wait, then, before accepting Jesus, for something extraordinary to happen. That something is never going to happen, and if it did, it would leave us as we were. *Now* is the time, under God's silent guidance, and in the quiet morning of our days, to range ourselves under the conquering banner of the great Captain who lives for evermore.

TWENTY-FIFTH SUNDAY

Morning

DAVID AND MEPHIBOSHETH

Passage to be read : 2 Sam. ix. 1-13.

IT is clear that David had been king for some considerable time when this beautiful incident occurred.

We know that at the time of Jonathan's death Mephibosheth was five years old (iv. 4), and now Mephibosheth himself had a young son, whose name was Micha (v. 12). Long years had passed, then, since that dark and ominous day when Saul and Jonathan were slain in their high places. And God had so loyally fulfilled His word to David, that he reigned, undisputed, over all Israel. But all the advancement of these stirring years, and all the alliances that were cemented in them, could never obliterate from the heart of David the covenant he had made long since with Jonathan (1 Sam. xx. 11-17). He might forget much in the pressure of kingship, but he could never forget that trysting in the fields. It was then he began to inquire about Saul's family. 'Is there yet any that is left of the house of Saul?' And our chapter tells us of David's great discovery, and of the noble use he put it to.

NOW we have all heard of the survival of the fittest: but sometimes a planning and present God takes a thought that the *unfittest* shall survive, and then the bravest sons and goodliest daughters pass away, and no one remains alive but Mephibosheth. How Saul would

have scorned this deformed and useless grandson had he been spared to see him! But neither Saul nor Jonathan ever saw his lameness: it was their *death* that had been the cause of it. His nurse had fled, when she heard of Mount Gilboa, with her precious charge on her shoulder in the Eastern fashion, and then, in the wild and womanly excitement—a stumble, and the dash of her burden on the pavement; and the fatherless boy was lamed for life (iv. 4). No wonder that he had grown up in retirement, somewhere in Gilead, across the Jordan. The staunchest supporter of the ruined house could never have made of *him* a Young Pretender. He would live on, in the house of the rich sheikh (xvii. 27), unknown and unhonoured, but happy with little Micha—when suddenly the uneventful days are broken by the galloping of the couriers from the king. Can you not picture the dread that would fall on Mephibosheth when he heard that he was summoned to the Court? It is said that the most powerful governor in Afghanistan used to tremble when he received an unexpected letter from the late Ameer. But the message of David was rich in loving-kindness—it was the beginning of the kindness of God (v. 3). And how generously Mephibosheth was received, and how royally he and his were treated by David, all that is written for us in our chapter.

FIRST, then, let us note *how loyal David was to his word*. When he had pledged himself long ago to be kind to Jonathan, his affairs were in a desperate condition; and he had risen to be a king since then. But the word he had pledged when in peril of his life, still bound him when he reached the throne; the change of lots had not changed his heart. How many have made a vow when they were ill, and quite forgotten it when they grew better! How many have had fair dreams when they were young and poor; but lost them, slowly, when the riches came! It is one element in the true

greatness of David that the pledges of his hours of humiliation were made good when on the throne. And is it not so, too, with our Redeemer? Is not that the perennial wonder of *His* word? It was pledged to *us*—like the word of David to Jonathan—when Jesus was a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief, and it is all fulfilled to us to-day when He reigns in the glory of His Kingship.

OBERVE, again, *how one is blessed for another's sake.* We hear, like a refrain, throughout this chapter, the words, 'For Jonathan's sake.' If Mephibosheth got back his lands again, and was called to share in the joy of the king's table, it was all because Jonathan had been his father. I doubt not that many of Machir's household had striven to do little kindnesses to Mephibosheth out of pity for his lameness. But David was kind to him not for his lameness' sake, but for the sake of Jonathan his father. And does not God often honour His people in this world by blessing others for their sakes? Was not Lot spared for the sake of Abraham (Gen. xix. 29)? And was not Laban blessed because of Jacob (Gen. xxx. 27)? Did not God bless Potiphar for Joseph's sake (Gen. xxxix. 5)? And the widow of Zarephath for Elijah's (1 Kings xvii. 15-24)? No man can tell how others may be blessed if *we* have really been the friends of God. No one can know what unsuspected influences may flow from lowly fellowship with Jesus. The friendship of David was a great thing for Jonathan; but not less so for Jonathan's poor son.

LASTLY, remark *how this sweet story is like a parable of the love of God.* You and I, impoverished and maimed, and under sentence of rejection like the house of Saul, are sought out, individually, by the great love of Jesus. And we are afraid, when we first come face to face with Him, and then we hear Him saying to us, 'Fear not.' And then He restores our forfeited inheritance, and

takes us into rich communion with Himself. All this God does for lost and helpless men; all this is the working of His wonderful grace. And whether or not God meant to hint at that when He summoned the historian to write down this incident, I can never hear the name of Mephibosheth but immediately I fall a-thinking of myself.

TWENTY-FIFTH SUNDAY

Evening

THE LABOURERS IN THE VINEYARD

Passage to be read: Matt. xx. 1-16.

AS we move through the preceding chapter of this Gospel we seem to breathe a different atmosphere; but the two chapters, though seemingly separated, stand in the closest connection with each other. In the former we meet with the rich young ruler and witness his sorrowful departure from the face of Christ; we hear, too, the question of Peter, What shall we have who have forsaken all and followed Thee? It is then that Jesus begins speaking about rewards of service. It is then, as if summing up the visible contrast between the rich young ruler and His poor disciples, that He says, 'Many that are first shall be last, and the last first' (Matt. xix. 30). And *then*, as though to show forth in a picture some of the mysteries He has been dealing with, He speaks this parable of the Labourers in the Vineyard.

NOTE first, then, *God's kingdom is like a vineyard*. It is an excellent exercise for all of us to recall the things that the Kingdom of God is like. It is equally good

for us to gather together some of the Bible references to the vine. The vines of Palestine were famous for their growth, and for the immense clusters of grapes which they produced. We all remember that splendid bunch that the spies bore on the staff from the valley of Eshcol (Num. xiii. 23). We cannot wonder, then, to find the vine and the vineyard among the most precious of the Bible metaphors. Israel is a vine brought out of Egypt, and planted in the Land of Promise by the Lord (Ps. lxxx. 8-10). To dwell under the vine is the choice emblem of domestic happiness (1 Kings iv. 25). It is a vine which Jesus selects to typify the union between His disciples and Himself (John xv. 1-6). And the vineyard becomes the figure of God's kingdom. Long centuries before, Jeremiah had cried, 'Many pastors have destroyed my vineyard' (Jer. xii. 10); and now our Lord, who had very profoundly studied Jeremiah, presses the same emblem into His service. Can we give two or three of the clear likenesses, that would make this metaphor a favourite with Jesus?

AGAIN, observe *God's anxiety for workers*. Above the door of the tramway office in a certain city there is written just now, 'No men wanted: none need apply.' All posts are full; there is no call for hands; men may be very poor and very hungry, but there is no help for them there. But the householder whom we read of in our story had no such notice on his vineyard gate. *His* great concern was not to keep workers out, but somehow or anyhow to get them in. So we find him early in the morning going out to the market-place to hire his men—how different a scene from the London Docks, for instance, where early in the morning the men are clamouring at the gates, and only a few out of the crowd are hired! And then at nine o'clock he is out again, and then in the height of noon, and then at three. These hours were the great hours of prayer in

Jewry: was not this householder's work a kind of prayer? And he has not done yet: he will make one more effort—an hour before sunset he is out again. It is clear that the great passion of the man is to get the idlers set to honest work. May we not say, with reverence and gratitude, that that is the passion of the Father of Jesus Christ? He has service for all, and He wants all to come and serve Him. *His* finger never wrote, 'No men need apply.' Whenever any of our young people, then, get the opportunity of doing something kind, when the hour comes that they can make some little sacrifice, and help in any way the cause of Jesus, let them not say, 'Bother!' or do it with a grudge; but just let them think that the Lord of the vineyard has come with this very bit of work for *them* to do.

NOTE once more that *God rewards all service*. In the old times of feudal law in Scotland, there was many a man who laboured all his days, and never got a penny of reward. In the Southern States, while slavery existed, the men and the women who did all the work dreamed often of the lash, but never of a wage. And in many a campaign, written of in our histories, the soldiers never saw their hire. But this householder was so careful of his word, that he began with the last comers in making account; and none of his men got less than they expected, while the great majority of them got far more. All which, I take it, is meant to teach us this—that all our service for Christ shall be rewarded. No worker shall ever get less than was agreed on; and the great multitude, to their own sweet surprise, shall be given more than they could ask or think. Now if it should seem to any of my readers that this is a mercenary view of spiritual things, I would bid them remember that even the choicest parable can only rudely embody the things of God. The reward

of plucking grapes may be a penny—there is a kind of gulf between the two. But, *spiritually*, the wage of service is new power to serve; and the reward of love is ever-deepening capacity of loving; and the hire for all honest effort to know Jesus, is to know Him at last as the chiefest among ten thousand.

LASTLY, observe *God's measures are not ours*. Do not think that this parable is meant to teach us that the self-same reward is to be given to all. If *that* were so, what about the talents? It so happens that all the workers get the penny; but it is not on that that the stress of the story lies. Had the latest comers chanced to begin at dawn, we feel that the householder would have given them sixpence. He was delighted with them because of their earnest spirit. They came at once; they did not stop to haggle. He saw that their whole heart was in their work, and he really paid them according to their heart. Do we not learn, then, that God does *not* measure service by length of time or anything external? God measures service by the motive of it, by the spirit that prompts it, by the secret heart. An hour with the heart in it for Jesus Christ is better and worthier than a heartless day. We really have not been serving well, if the first thing we do at sunset is to murmur (v. 11). 'My son, give me thine *heart!*' 'Yes, Lord, we give it, and all these questions of the pence we leave with Thee!'

TWENTY-SIXTH SUNDAY

Morning

THE EWE LAMB

Passage to be read : 2 Sam. xii. 1-6.

WE have several examples in the Old Testament of the *parable*, but the parable in our chapter for to-day stands unmatched in its beauty and its power. In the fourteenth chapter of this book, we have the parable spoken by the widow of Tekoah. We have then the parable of the vineyard and the grapes, directed by Isaiah against Jerusalem (Isa. v. 1-6). Again we have the parabolic fable, whereby Jotham sought to instruct the Shechemites, of the trees choosing a king (Judg. ix. 7-15). These parables, and a few others, are well known ; there is a fresh and homely appeal in them that makes them memorable. But they are all surpassed in the qualities that really give rank to parables, by Nathan's little story of the ewe lamb. How simple it is, and yet how sharply pointed ! How true, and yet how exquisitely tender ! We have to turn to the parables of Jesus, before we light on any other so telling. Let the children be so familiar with the story (I am sure that Jesus knew it by heart in boyhood) that whenever they see a lamb upon the hill, they will catch a glimpse of prophet and of king.

NOTE firstly *how wisely and well Nathan played his part*. This was not the first time, and it was not the last, that prophets and preachers stood in the presence of princes. In our own history there are some famous

instances of the ministers of the Word rebuking sovereigns. John Knox stood, more than once, before Queen Mary, and spoke to her, almost harshly, on her behaviour. And Andrew Melville, in audience with King James, never flinched in boldly uttering the truth. But brave as Knox was, and polished as Melville was, I think that Nathan did better than either of them. We feel that the Lord who sent him to the king, was signally present at the interview. Was not this little story of the lamb exquisitely fitted to the heart of David? Is there not the music of heart-poetry in it, that would appeal to the poetic king? Nathan was perfectly faithful to his task, yet in the performance of it, most wise and tender. He came as the agent of a most righteous God, and yet the smoking flax he would not quench. Let us be sure that when we go at God's bidding, we shall not lack the necessary gifts. If He sends us out to any difficult duty, He will see to it that all our need is met. Nathan was entering on a struggle with kingly sin, but he went not a-warring at his own charges.

ONCE more remark *how clearly we observe another's faults*. As Nathan went on with the tale of the rich man, you picture the flashing eye of David. You see his hand groping for his sword—his heart was so hot at that high-handed work! He was mightily angry—it was a dastardly act. The man must die, and the lamb be restored fourfold! David discerned the sin of it at once. It stood out clear in the frame of another's life. We are all quick to observe another's faults. And perhaps we are never readier to observe them, than when these faults in another are our own. The sins we are aptest to suspect in others, are the sins that have been playing havoc with ourselves. The vices that we are surest to detect are those that our own characters have known. It is *not* the boy who would never think of cheating who is always suspecting cheating in the class. The boy who is always suspicious of his comrades has done a good deal of

cheating for himself. And it is *not* the unselfish little girl who confides to me what 'a selfish thing' Mary So-and-so is. It is the little girl about whom I have prayed in secret that God would take *her* selfishness away. The things we see are most often the things we feel. We have known them, and that has given us eyes for them. So David was fiercely indignant at Nathan's tyrant, because he had lorded it just so himself.

AND that leads us to notice next *how little we are acquainted with ourselves*. I have heard of a boy getting his photograph taken, and when he saw it he cried in astonishment, 'Is that *me*?' He had brushed his hair before the mirror for years; yet he hardly knew his portrait when he saw it. And I have heard, too, of a snapshot that was taken of a man who was under the influence of drink. And when the tippler saw it he was so utterly ashamed that he should look like that, that he vowed he never would touch drink again. These two were ignorant of what they *looked* like; they had little idea of their personal appearance. But David (in this terrible season of failure) was very ignorant of what he *was*—he did not recognise the prophet's portrait. Now God, by the hand of prophet and apostle, has painted a wonderful portrait of you and me. It is life-like, there is no flattery in it; it shows our worst, and it reveals our best. Have you ever studied that portrait in the Bible, and said in your heart, 'Yes, Lord, that is *I*'? We never really come to know ourselves until we come to know and love our Bibles. It is then that God says to us, as Nathan to David, 'Thou art the man.' And as that was the beginning of David's return into the gladness of the love of God, so to see ourselves as we are—and our need of Christ—is *our* first step to reconciliation.

LASTLY, let us remark *how simply God works upon our hearts*. It was a simple story that touched the heart of David. The power of God was in it; it was enough.

A little story achieved for the heart of David what all the plagues had failed to do for Pharaoh. Now I want the young people to remember that. It will let them see how easily God can use them. They cannot do wonderful deeds as Moses did, but they can all serve on Nathan's lines. He told, at the bidding of God, a little tale; and they can do little kindnesses to-day. He served by telling a very simple story; and they can serve by some very simple deed. And just as Nathan succeeded where Moses failed—did more by his weakness than Moses by his wonders—who knows what unexpected blessings may not flow from the simple service of a little child?

TWENTY-SIXTH SUNDAY

Evening

THE AMBITIOUS DISCIPLES

Passage to be read: Matt. xx. 20-34.

THE disciples had been pondering deeply, we may be sure, on the great promise Jesus had lately made to them—'When the Son of man shall sit in the throne of His glory, ye also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel' (Matt. xix. 28). So strongly had these words impressed James and John, that from the hour they heard them they could think of little else. And gradually, as they dwelt upon that future, new ambitions began to mount within them; they began to dream of holding the most coveted seats, on the right hand and the left hand of the King. But they remembered how Jesus had rebuked them when once before they had striven for precedence. They dreaded such another rebuke, should they venture to broach the same subject again. So they made their

mother the petitioner, they entreated Jesus through their mother's love, and it is the story of that entreaty that forms the lesson for to-day. Do you know what their mother's name was? It was Salome (cp. Matt. xxvii. 56 with Mark xv. 40). Do you know what Salome means? It means *perfect*. I believe that Salome is perfect *now*, though she was very far from being perfect *then*. And do you know where we meet with her again? Once at the cross, where she stands far off and watches (Mark xv. 40); and then in the early morning at the sepulchre, where she has gone to anoint the body of Jesus (Mark xvi. 1).

LET us note, too, that *all this happened little more than a week before the crucifixion*. The shadow of the cross lay on the path of Jesus, His soul was filled with the thought of the approaching agony, and He had begun to talk very plainly of it to His own—and all the time His own were dreaming their own dreams, and happy in the golden thought of thrones. They thought that the kingdom was to be realised at once; were they not travelling to Jerusalem for that very end? But Jesus saw the darkness of Calvary before Him, and on either side (not seated upon thrones) a thief. Do you mark the gulf between the thoughts of Jesus and the thoughts of those who were nearest and dearest to Him? On the one side ambition and dominion; on the other, renunciation and the grave. Surely, in the next year or two, some mighty power must have been at work to bring round the disciples to the mind of Jesus. Just think how the cross *found* them, as their hearts are revealed in this incident, then think what in the after-days they *became*, and it is impossible not to feel the action, and detect the presence, of a risen Lord.

THIS passage again teaches very clearly that *we must drink the cup if we would wear the crown*. When Jesus spoke about His *cup* He was using a familiar Bible

figure. Sometimes it is a Scripture image for joy: 'My cup runneth over' (Ps. xxiii. 5); 'I will take the cup of salvation' (Ps. cxvi. 13). Sometimes, as here, it is the emblem of sorrow: 'If this cup may not pass away from Me, Thy will be done' (Matt. xxvi. 42). Now, when Jesus says to His two disciples, Can ye drink My cup? Can ye suffer My baptism? He is not merely questioning their power to suffer—He is hinting that *that* is the one way to the throne. 'Ah, James and John,' says Jesus, with infinite gentleness, 'your eyes have been dazzled with that promised throne; but I tell you that the only road to that, lies through suffering and the death of self. I am not a tyrant who can dispense these honours even to the favourite who has lain upon My bosom; they shall be granted by God in perfect justice to those who have trodden most worthily the way of the cross.' There must be the cup before the crown, says Jesus. There must be the baptism before the throne. And the strange thing is, that that truth was never more nobly illustrated than in the after experience of James and John. One of the two was the first of the apostles to drink the cup, and to be baptized with the baptism of blood (Acts xii. 1). The other had the longest experience among them all of bitter trial and persecution. And so Salome, after all, has had a royal answer to her prayer. But truly she did not know what she was asking.

ANOTHER suggestion arises from our theme—*how wonderfully Jesus could bring light from darkness*. When the ten heard what the two had asked, we read that they were moved with indignation. I take it that the one spirit was in them all, and that the ten were as selfish in their irritation, as the two had shown themselves in their ambition. They were all heated, envious, and hasty. It was like an hour of the Prince of darkness. *This*, too, after all that had come and gone between them—the wonder is, it did not break Christ's heart. But

Jesus, with perfect patience, begins to teach them. The simple lessons must be gone over again. So step by step He leads them onward and inward, till they are face to face with the mystery of His death (v. 28). Now, is not that a notable example of the power of Jesus to bring light out of darkness? Do you not feel as you read the story that moments of difficulty were His opportunity? How easy to have denounced James and John! How easy to have lost heart with all the twelve! I am almost certain *we* should have done that. But Jesus so redeemed that hour of bitterness, that we can thank God the ten were ever angry. And He has left us an example, that we should follow in His steps.

TWENTY-SEVENTH SUNDAY

Morning

ABSALOM'S REBELLION AND DEATH

Passages to be read : 2 Sam. xv 1-12 ; xviii.

ABSALOM was the third son of David. His mother was Talmai, a king's daughter. He comes before us vividly, for the first time, in his murderous revenge on his half-brother Amnon. After that terrible deed he had to fly, and he sought shelter in the mountain fastnesses where his father-in-law held his petty highland court (xiii. 37). In this wild retreat he remained for three years, nursing strange projects in his dark and restless heart, and little dreaming how his father in Jerusalem would have given all the world to have him home again. At last (by an artifice of Joab) he was recalled, though for two years more David refused to see him. Five years had flown since that day of blood at Baal-hazor, before father and son were reconciled again. But the iron had entered into Absalom's soul. The love he owed his father was forgotten. It was driven out by the bitterness of exile, and the haunting fear that Bathsheba's son should supplant him. And such was the popularity of Absalom, and such (spite of his heart) his personal charm ; such, too, the weakening of David's kingly influence through his most unkingly and unkindly sin, that when the standard of revolt was raised at Hebron, the hearts of Israel went after Absalom (xv. 13). The rebellion seemed to issue in success. David with a breaking heart fled to

Mahanaim—where Jacob had seen angels long ago (Gen. xxxii. 1-2). Absalom entered Jerusalem in triumph, and assumed his father's royal rights.

BUT the triumph of the rebellion was short-lived. Had the counsel of Ahithophel been followed, David would have been attacked at once. But the counsel was rejected, and when at last Absalom went out to give battle to his father, David had mustered a strong army. The forces met in a wild district of Ephraim, shadowed with oak-woods and tangled with bush and briar, and we know how the day went against Absalom. We have known, too, since we were little children, how Absalom was left hanging on the oak, and how, in spite of the earnest pleadings of David, he was stabbed as he hung there, by Joab. All that, with his hasty burial in the wood-pit, and the casting of stones on his grave in execration, and the agony of David at the tidings, closes this sad and memorable passage.

NOW let us note first *the unlikely instruments of God*. We know that a woe had fallen on David. The sentence of God had gone forth against him, after he fell into his fearful sin (and God's word never returns unto Him void); but who could have dreamed that the instrument of judgment would have been the darling of his father's heart? Yet we hear almost nothing of Absalom in Scripture till the light of his father's sin is shed on him, and then, with all his beauty and all his gifts, he moves before us as God's instrument. Does not that often arrest us in God's dealings? Does He not often choose unlikeliest instruments? We cannot read the story of gifted Absalom but we feel how unexpected are God's agents. Who would have thought that this gallant and handsome son was to work out the woe upon his father's life? Who would have believed that

the bond-slaves in Egypt were to keep alive the knowledge of the one God? Who would have guessed that little Samuel would have been chosen to hear the doom of Eli? Or that the twelve would have been the instruments of Jesus in spreading the knowledge of His truth abroad? My ways are not your ways, saith the Lord.

WE are to learn again that *there is something better than popularity*. We see from our chapter how popular Absalom was. He had the arts and parts to win a people's favour. He treated everybody with a certain honour; he made a show with his retinue; he was beautiful. These graces and gifts, well used, made him the people's idol; yet back of it all was a bad and treacherous heart. So we see that to be popular is not everything. It is a thousand times nobler to be *good*. We are never too young to covet the *best* gifts; we should resolve from the first to be true to God and duty.

AND, lastly, we must observe *the wonderful constancy of a father's love*. Through the years of exile that Absalom spent at Geshur there was never a day but David was thinking of him. David woke every morning with the prayer that God would give a new heart to his dear son. Then the rebellion came with all its bitterness, but even that did not quench the love of David. Let the battle be waged as fiercely as men would, no spear, in the hottest of it, was to be turned on Absalom; and when a spear *was* turned, and Absalom died, and the tidings of the tragedy reached David—nothing but love, love wonderful and deep, can explain his cry of sorrow and the agony. Now do you not feel in that strong love some token of our Father who is in heaven? Do you not know that with a love like that (only a thousand times stronger and better still) God loves

each one of us? Let us think of it and yield ourselves up to it. 'We love, because He first loved us,' and greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.

TWENTY-SEVENTH SUNDAY

Evening

ZACCHÆUS

Passage to be read : Luke xix. 1-10.

THE last chapter closed with Jesus giving sight to a blind man ; to-day's opens with the priceless story of Zacchæus. And that swift passage from the blind beggar to this high official well illustrates the rapid changes that meet us in the life of Jesus Christ. We are prone sometimes to think of the lot of Jesus as a very limited and circumscribed one. We think there was little in it of that movement and variety that characterise our life in modern times. And so (almost unconsciously) many have grown to feel that Jesus is standing far away from them. As a matter of fact, I question if there ever was a life so rich in its variety as Christ's. It is amazing how swiftly the scenes change; how constantly the environment is shifting. This rapid transition from the roadside pauper to the home of one of the richest men in Jericho is typical of the experience of Jesus.

THE first thing we note here is, *there is an interest in Christ in most unlikely quarters.* If there was one man who might have seemed deadened to religion, it was this receiver-general of Jericho. He had had such treatment from the priests of Jericho (and Jericho was a very priestly city), as might have thoroughly disgusted him with religion. He had grown rich, too, in very question-

able ways—and had not this Jesus spoken tremendous words about the perils even of clean riches? And yet Zacchæus was aflame with eagerness to get into close touch with Jesus Christ. *Why* he was so, maybe we cannot tell. We do not know what he had heard from his collectors. We cannot tell what his home was in his childhood. We have no hint of the ministries of God in keeping his conscience alive through all the years. All we can say is that this was the most unlikely of all quarters, yet here was a hidden interest in Christ. Now I wish all parents and teachers to remember that. It will give them new heart and hope for certain children. Who knows what little boy may not be interested, when we recall the interest of this little man?

AGAIN, we learn that *where there's a will there's a way*. Jesus was at the height of His popularity. Wherever He moved the narrow streets were crowded. It would have taken a Saul to have seen Him well; there seemed no hope for a small man like Zacchæus; and had Zacchæus had a small heart in his bosom, he would have gone home and said it was impossible. But Zacchæus had had a great will to grow rich, and he had found there was a way to *that*. And now he had a great will to see Jesus, and he was not the sort of person to be stopped. He quite forgot himself, says Matthew Henry. He climbed the sycamore like any schoolboy. Perhaps he had heard that except we become as *children* we cannot *see* the kingdom of heaven—or the king. At any rate he was earnestly bent on seeing Jesus, and as a result he saw Him and was seen. All which has been written down to teach us that the whole-hearted search for God is always crowned. What texts lay stress on that? 'Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you.' 'Those that seek Me early shall find Me.'

ONCE more we see that *it often calls for courage to be kind*. Did you ever think how brave it was of Jesus to speak in this frank and friendly way to Zacchæus? Had Jesus been intent on being popular, He would never have cast His eyes upon the sycamore. No class was more hated in Jewry than these tax-gatherers, and the richer they were the more they were detested. Yet Jesus, in the strength of His great purpose, deliberately set that hatred at defiance; He made no effort to conceal from the crowd that the man they loathed was going to be His friend. Immediately they began to murmur at Him (v. 7)—it was the hoarse cry of a deep-seated anger. It was the breaking of the waves upon Him, which were soon, in floods, to go over His head. But calmly and very sweetly Jesus prosecuted the friendship; it called for wonderful courage to be kind. Would you have dared to act so, do you think? Have you ever tried it in your own small way? *Zacchæus* forgot himself, says Matthew Henry. But that was nothing to the self-forgetfulness of Jesus.

MARK next *the moral influence of Gospel joy*. We are told that Zacchæus received Jesus joyfully; you can picture the tides of gladness in his heart. He had only hoped to get a glimpse of Jesus, and now he was going to be His host. And it was just the joy of it all, I take it, filling his poor soul, and sweeping up into the empty creeks, that inspired him to the noble sacrifices of verse eight. I dare say the priests had often preached at him to go and give half his fortune to the poor. But somehow that had only closed his heart; they had never touched the spring of sacrifice. Now comes Jesus and fills him with great joy, and he cannot do enough for such a Lord—the joy of the Lord had indeed become his strength. Do you see the moral power of Gospel joy? Do you recognise the ethical worth of it? Even Jesus for the *joy* that was set before Him, endured the cross, despising the shame.

LASTLY, and in a word, observe *how various are the tokens of the new life*. How did it show itself in the Philippian jailer? It showed itself first by his faith. And how in the woman who anointed Christ's feet. First, by her much love. And what were its clearest tokens in Zacchæus? Repentance and earnest effort to amend. *One* life, yet showing itself in diverse fruits. *One* spirit, yet working outward in various ways. In which way is the hidden life of Christ revealing itself in those who read this page?

TWENTY-EIGHTH SUNDAY

Morning

SOLOMON'S TEMPLE

Passage to be read : 1 Kings v. 1-18.

WE have seen how David had desired to build a temple to the Lord, and how he had been forbidden by the prophet. The times were not ripe then for such a splendid building, and the hands of David had been too deeply steeped in blood. But though David (to his own great sorrow) had been prohibited from accomplishing his project, he had not been forbidden to prepare for it. And we know from the Chronicles what lavish preparation David had made against the day when his son should build God's house. He had collected stone-masons and skilled artificers; he had amassed talents of gold and talents of silver; he had gathered together great stores of brass and iron; he had ransacked the markets for gems and precious stones. All this was lying to hand for Solomon when the day came on which he resolved to build. Now the strange thing is that, reading to-day's chapter, you do not hear a word about all that. You would think that the whole work from start to finish was the unaided work of Solomon. All which should remind us of the simple fact that we owe more to our fathers than the world would sometimes think. I do not suppose the writer of this book deliberately meant to ignore David. And when a boy does something uncommon and says *I* did it, I do not suppose he means to slight his father. Still, it is well to be reminded sometimes of how our

parents have prepared things for us, and how by their love and their prayers by our bedside as we slept, and by their sacrifices for us in our childhood, they make it possible for us to build our temples.

THE hour then came when the way was open for Solomon. And the first act of Solomon was to send to Hiram with a view of getting cedar down from Lebanon. This Hiram had been on the friendliest terms with David; perhaps he had been a tributary prince. The story says that Solomon married his daughter; and to-day when the traveller climbs the hillside to the east of Tyre, and asks the dragoman what is that solitary and wind-swept monument, he is told it is the tomb of Hiram. This Hiram, then, was to aid in cutting timber, away up in the Lebanons where the cedars grew, 'for there is not among us any that can *skill* (a fine old verb that we have been very foolish in dropping) to hew timber like unto the Sidonians.' Can you remember any old Testament texts that dwell with delight upon the forests of Lebanon? Israel shall cast forth his roots as Lebanon, says Hosea (xiv. 5). The smell of thy garments is like the smell of Lebanon, says Solomon in his song (iv. 11), and perhaps the fragrant cedar logs of Hiram were being piled on Mount Moriah as he wrote. Have you ever seen a cedar of Lebanon, with its straight-spreading branches and its resinous fragrance? In the parks of many of our old English castles you will find them, and the villagers will tell you how the old knight brought them home from the crusades. This, then, was Hiram's task (fulfilled so willingly that Jewish legend tells that he enjoyed a thousand years in paradise for it); he saw to the hewing of cedar in the Lebanons.

NOW you will see at a glance what a work it was to get these trees transported to Jerusalem. And when we remember that besides the trees there were

great stones that had been hewed up in the mountains, the work might seem almost incredible. There are stones in the ruins of the Temple to this day that are over thirty feet in length. No wonder, then, that we hear of such vast numbers of burden-bearers and workmen and hewers. If it took a hundred thousand men (as Herodotus tells us) to build the great pyramid of Egypt, we can hardly dispute the totals of our chapter. First, then, the timber was sent down from Lebanon on artificial paths of rounded tree-trunks—as it is sent down to this very day from the heights of the richly wooded Vosges. Then it was launched in great rafts into the sea and floated along, some hundred miles, to Joppa. And then by a steep and rocky road (and for nearly the distance that Glasgow is from Edinburgh) it was borne with infinite labour to Mount Moriah. It was on Mount Moriah (we believe) that Abraham laid Isaac on the altar (see Gen. xxii. 2). It was on Mount Moriah that David had seen the angel with his sword drawn over the threshing-floor (2 Sam. xxiv. 16). It was here, then, that the Temple was to rise, without the sound of hammer or axe or tool. 'So they prepared timber and stones to build the house,' and with that our passage closes.

NOW let us take three lessons from this chapter: and first, *how vast are the preparations for God's Temple*. They were begun by David and completed by Solomon. They embraced the whole country in a kind of network. They dotted the sea in the shape of the rafts of cedar. They set the echoes of Lebanon a-ringing. All this, for the Temple of the Lord. Now think of Jesus Christ, who said, 'Destroy *this* temple,' pointing to His body, and remember the mighty preparation before the building of *that* living Temple. For the law of Moses and the vision of prophets, and the sacrifices that smoked on Jewish altars, all that, with the struggle and failure of

the heathen world, and all the gleams of light that God had given it—all that was preparation for the Temple. Then mark *how various may be our services for God*. Just think of the thousands who were engaged by Solomon in the prosecution of his great design. They were all busy for one end and object, yet every man of them had his peculiar task. It took a special skill to hew the cedar-trees; it was a work by itself to get them floated; it was not every navigator who could sail them to Joppa; nor every teamster who could deliver them safely to Jerusalem. Such gifts, and a thousand beside, were all needed, and were all sanctified for Temple service. We all have some gift that we can use for God. In the service of Christ and of His Church there is room for all manner of skill and activity. There are diversities of gifts, but the same spirit. Then note *how silently God's Temple rose*. 'God comes to us without sound of bell,' says the old proverb, and He who was greater than the Temple 'would not strive, nor cry, nor lift up His voice in the streets.'

TWENTY-EIGHTH SUNDAY

Evening

THE PARABLE OF THE POUNDS

Passage to be read: Luke xix. 11-27.

THE Gospel tells us what was the occasion of this parable. It was spoken to correct the false impression that the Kingdom of God should immediately appear. Roused by the miracles that they had seen so lately, and impressed by the crowds who were thronging around Jesus, the people (and it may be the disciples too)

were stirred to hope that the Kingdom was at hand. They little dreamed of the tragedy of Calvary, and of the strange departure of the Lord. It was then that Jesus, with infinite skill and power, narrated this little story of the nobleman. It was an emblem of His own departure to a far country to receive a kingdom. It taught in figure that *first* there must be departure, and the long absence of the King, before the Kingdom could come in its full glory. Note, too, how singularly apt was the choice of such a parable as this. For in Jericho, where it was uttered, there rose the palace of Archelaus, and Archelaus had acted like this nobleman. He had gone to Rome to seek a kingdom there, under the bitter hatred of the Jews. And the crowd may have been talking of Archelaus, when Jesus began this story of the nobleman. They could never forget it, then, it was so apposite. It seemed to rise out of their own experience. And so far am I from thinking that here we have two parables run together (as many have held) that I believe that our Lord deliberately chose that framework to introduce the lesson of the pounds.

NOW note that *all these servants got the same endowment*. That is the first point to be kept clear. In the *talents*, each servant got a different sum. One received five, another two, and the third one. But *here* all the ten servants get the same amount; each gets one pound, and is to trade with that. That means that there are various gifts and graces which are bestowed in differing measures upon all; but there are some things we all receive alike, they are distributed equally amongst us. What are your talents then? that is the question; and what do you think your pound is? In other words, how do you differ from the folk around you, and in what respect are you all on the same footing? Well, one of you is cleverer than the other, and one is stronger, and one

has a firmer will. These things, and a thousand things like these, I take it, are all comprehended in your talents. But have you not all got the *Word of God* alike? Is not the one Bible in your hearts and hands? I believe that *that* is the pound we have to trade with—the word of the Kingdom we have got from Christ. Jesus has gone; we do not see Him now; but He has left with all of us the Gospel. And it is His word, so simple and so true, so full of wisdom, of power, and of love, that we are to play the merchant with (if I may use that word) till the King returns from the land that is far off.

BUT mark again *what a little gift this was*. It almost seems unworthy of a king. A talent was a tolerable sum of money—its value was somewhere over two hundred pounds. But a mina (for that is the word for pound in the original) was only some sixty shillings of our money. One mina to each servant from the nobleman—what a trifling gratuity it appears! Yet be sure that Jesus had a meaning in that—the sum was chosen in the Lord's perfect wisdom. Does it not tell us that what the nobleman wanted was to find if his followers were really *faithful*? It is often so much harder to be faithful in little things than in the great transactions. Make it a thousand pounds, and the dullest of all the servants would have felt the responsibility upon him. But make it one pound, and we shall soon discover the hearts that are lealest to their absent Lord. Now it is just *that* that Jesus longs to find. The risen Lord is saying, Lovest thou Me? And in the gifts we equally enjoy there is an abiding test of our love and loyalty. One look seems a small thing, and yet one look broke Simon Peter's heart. One sentence seems a very little thing, and yet one sentence converted the Philippian jailer. One pound seems quite a trifling gift, yet that gift becomes the touchstone of our character,

OBSERVE again that *these servants were unequally rewarded, but they were rewarded according to their faithfulness.* Did you ever note which of the three Christ praises? He only praises the man who made ten pounds. He *rewards* the servant whose pound had gained five pounds, but you will notice that He does not *praise* him. The man has done something, and he shall have his guerdon, but he gets no warm commendation from the Lord. Does not that hint that he who had gained five pounds might have done better if he had really tried? It was not inferior ability, Christ means, and it was not any bad luck in business, that kept him from winning ten pounds too. It was just that he had not traded with all his heart like the servant who was made happy with the praise. Let us learn, then, this simple lesson of rewards, that our faithfulness is going to be the measure of them. And let that thought make us doubly earnest to be very faithful with our pound. You say it is very little you can do? But 'because thou hast been faithful in very little, have thou authority over ten cities.'

NOTE, lastly, that *unused gifts are misused gifts.* The man who did nothing with his dowry, lost it. He had not squandered it, that was the strange thing. He had only kept it useless in the napkin. Yet not to use it was finally to lose it. And it is always so with the good gifts of God. The gifts of God are never at home in napkins. We must employ them, if we would enjoy them. It is a commonplace. But it makes all the difference between success and failure here, and between life and death in the eternity.

TWENTY-NINTH SUNDAY

Morning

SOLOMON'S GREATNESS: THE QUEEN OF SHEBA

Passage to be read : 1 Kings x. 1-15.

SO great was the magnificence of Solomon, and so widely had the rumours of it spread, that strangers were attracted to Jerusalem from all parts (v. 24). The city would often be thronged by multitudes speaking different languages, as it was afterwards thronged at the Feast of Pentecost (Acts ii.), when a glory greater than Solomon's was manifested. According to Eastern custom, too, and may we not say according to that law that to him that hath shall be given (Matt. xiii. 12), no man came without his gift. And we read of vessels of silver and vessels of gold, and garments and armour and spices and horses and mules, added to the abundance of the king (v. 25). I wonder what Saul, fresh from his father's farm (1 Sam. xi. 5), would have thought of this Egyptian magnificence. I wonder what David, who had his favourite mule (1 Kings i. 33), would have said to these chariots and caparisoned horses. For Josephus, who is great on Solomon's splendour, gives lavish details about the king in his chariot, with horses of incomparable swiftness, and drivers clothed in Tyrian purple, having dust of gold sprinkled in their hair (Antiq. VIII. vii. 3).

NOW among these strangers there came one who excited a quite peculiar interest. This was the Queen of Sheba, or as our Lord with an impressive

vagueness calls her, the Queen of the South (Matt. xii. 42). We know that the Emperor of Abyssinia is named Menelek—and a man of uncommon power he seems to be. Well, if we should meet an Abyssinian, and ask him who the *first* Menelek was, he would answer at once the son of the Queen of Sheba. For all the Abyssinians believe that the Queen of Sheba in our chapter was *their* queen, and that Solomon married her, and Menelek was their son. It is an old legend but a groundless one. No doubt the fame of Solomon had reached Ethiopia, as the fame of 'a greater than Solomon' was to do by and by (Acts viii. 27); but it had reached Arabia as well, and this queen was an Arabian lady. Wave after wave of almost incredible rumour had come lapping up to her secluded kingdom. And always there was some whisper of the Lord in it—it was the fame of Solomon concerning the name of the Lord (v. 1). Until at last, impelled by a curiosity that had some hunger for the divine in it, she set off to see things for herself. What a stir in the narrow and crowded streets of Jerusalem, when the long train of camels came through the gate! What gazing of children, and what a world of mystery in the strange dresses and the Arabian speech! There would be many a sleepless brain, and many a dream, in the little beds of Jerusalem that night. It must have been superb to be a boy when Solomon reigned.

NOW we are told what was the first object of the queen. She wished to prove Solomon with hard questions (v. 1). In other words, she wished to ask him riddles, for the hard questions were something of that kind. To *us* that seems a somewhat foolish object—more fitted for the tea-table than for thrones. But we must remember that in the ancient world the folk took riddles very seriously. Plutarch tells us that Homer died of grief because he was unable to answer a certain riddle. And there was the Sphinx, too, with her hard

question, that was answered at last (and the answer was *man*) by Œdipus. And then in the Old Testament there was the riddle of Samson (Judg. xiv.), and in the New Testament the number of the beast (Rev. xiii. 18)—all which had something of life and death in them. It was with 'hard questions,' then, that the Queen of Sheba began, and Solomon told her all her questions (v. 3); and though we are quite ignorant of what the particular questions were, some beautiful stories about them have drifted down the ages. Perhaps the most beautiful of all is this, that the queen held in her hand two bouquets, the one of real and the other of artificial flowers (and the latter a most perfect imitation), and she asked Solomon, without moving from his throne, to tell which were the real and which the false. What would *you* have done, think you, on the spur of the moment? The story says that Solomon bade open the lattice, and outside the lattice was a pleasant garden—and the bees came in and settled on the real flowers! Then after the hard questions came the communing (v. 2), and the survey of all the royal magnificence (v. 4). Until at last, with all the wonder of it, the Queen of Sheba was struck dumb (v. 5), and cried, in words that have been used a thousand times to hint at the glories of the *new* Jerusalem: 'The half hath never been told.'

NOW when we turn to the New Testament, we shall find Jesus drawing two lessons from this incident, and the first is *the lesson of lawful curiosity* (Matt. xii. 42). There are times when it is sinful to be curious—can you give some Bible instances? There is the instance of Eve (Gen. iii.), and that of Lot's wife (Gen. xix.), and that of the men of Bethshemesh who looked into the ark (1 Sam. vi. 19-21). But there are other times when to be curious is *not* sinful; it is an instinct, that may become a duty, and may rise into a noble passion; and on that eager spirit, that is urgent to see and prove, our Lord has

set His seal of commendation. Are you indifferent—that is the point—to what is great and good? Can you go on, when you hear of it, in your old way without a single stirring of heart towards it? Then ‘the queen of the south shall rise up in judgment with this generation, and shall condemn it.’

AND the second is *the lesson of undetected glory* (Matt. vi. 29). It was in the visit of the Queen of Sheba that the glory of Solomon came to its crown. I dare say it seemed to the patriotic Jew that the world would never view the like again. Then Jesus came, and pointed to the lilies—to the scarlet anemone and golden amaryllis, and men learned that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. Was not that a lesson in undetected glories? Does it not intimate that round our very feet (had we but eyes to see the wonder of it) are things more wonderful and rich and beautiful than ever dazzled these eyes from far Arabia? Lord, open our eyes that we may see! Then we shall never pluck a flower out of the grass, but we shall feel that a greater than Solomon is here.

TWENTY-NINTH SUNDAY

Evening.

THE ANOINTING AT BETHANY

Passage to be read: Matt. xxvi. 1-16.

WE are now approaching the last days of the earthly life of Jesus, and our lesson opens with the clear declaration from our Saviour's lips that in two days He would be crucified. There is a

singular interest in Matthew's little preface to these words: he tells us that it was 'when Jesus had finished all these sayings' that He spoke plainly about His crucifixion. That means, I take it, that the mind of Christ was calm; that there was order and quiet progress in His teaching; that He moved forward through His many lessons with a deliberate and sure advance, till His hearers were able to bear the news of Calvary. How apt we are, when a great secret holds us, to blurt it out in an ill-considered way! How thoughtless and how unkind we often are, in the eager telling of unpleasant things! The narrative of Matthew deepens our impression of the noble self-restraint of Jesus. Matthew had felt in Christ that sweet reserve without which love is sure to prove a wastrel. Observe, too, that when Jesus foretells His death, He does not say He is *going to be* betrayed. He says, 'The Son of Man *is* betrayed to be crucified' (v. 2). That intimates that in the heart of Judas, Christ read the deed as if already done. In the thought of the traitor everything was planned, and Jesus is a discerner of men's thought. The secret imaginings of our to-day are the open sins and failures of our to-morrow. There is a deep philosophy of conduct in the advice of Paul, to bring every *thought* into captivity to Christ. I fancy that God sees, hidden in every acorn, the beauty and the gnarled strength of the oak-tree; so Jesus, in the dark and brooding heart of Judas, saw the arrest in the garden, and the cross. And one point more: The high-priest is called Caiaphas (v. 3). But it seems that Caiaphas was only his distinguishing name. His personal name was Joseph, but there were so many Josephs that men called him Joseph Caiaphas, perhaps Joseph the Oppressor. Can we recall a similar Bible instance where the name of Joseph has been almost forgotten? 'Joses, who by the apostles was surnamed Barnabas, which is, being interpreted, the Son of Consolation' (Acts iv. 36).

THEN follows the beautiful scene at Bethany, and we cannot too closely note the setting of it. It is immediately preceded by this black conspiracy (vs. 1-5); it is immediately followed by the traitor's bargain (vs. 14-16). On the one side, fear and jealousy and hatred; on the other side, treachery and bargain-driving. And in the centre (a rose between the thorns) a love that forgot everything and lavished all. Who Simon the leper was, we do not know. I like to think he was that leper we read of, who had cried, 'Lord, if Thou wilt, Thou canst make me clean' (Matt. viii. 2). Whoever he was, no doubt our Lord *had* cleansed him: and yet men called him Simon the leper still. You see how old names, like old reputations, stick. Men keep them alive with a kind of evil pleasure. There would be many who could never talk of Simon but they would add, 'Of course, you have heard he was a leper once?' Just as there are families who can never praise a neighbour but they close by asking, 'You know he was once a bankrupt?' And yet I think that Simon loved his name. It was a standing memorial of one glorious morning. He never could think how he had been a leper but it led him to think of how he had met the Lord; and now that that same Lord was at his table, he may have been saying, 'My cup is running over.' It was then that this woman, whom we know to have been Mary, performed this act that was to live for ever. She broke the alabaster box of very precious ointment, and poured it on Jesus' head as He reclined at meat. And the disciples were indignant and thought it sheer extravagance; but Jesus crowned the act with immortality. Just note that in the ancient world rare ointments were commonly held in alabaster vases. Herodotus tells somewhere that among the presents sent by King Cambyses to the Ethiopians there was an alabaster vessel of nard like Mary's. Now, if this woman were indeed the sister of Lazarus, may not the ointment have been purchased to anoint *his* body, and so have been

given with a double meaning to the Lord who had raised her brother from the grave?

THE first thing to impress us in this story is Christ's rich interpretation of the deed. It was a simple action, done by a sinful woman, yet Jesus drew a wealth of meaning from it. To the disciples it was a foolish exhibition. Even the best of them thought lightly of it. Christ had no need of it, so they began to reason; He came not to be ministered unto but to minister. Were there no paupers in the village of Bethany? Were there no starving children in Jerusalem? And might not the ointment have been sold for their behoof? A murmur of disapproval ran round the table, scarce audible, perhaps, when it reached John, but loud and positive when Judas voiced it (John xii. 4). And then, had you asked the woman what she meant, I dare say she would have stammered in reply. She might have said she had never stopped to reason; she had only listened to her heart, and there she was. None of the disciples knew what she was doing; I question if she really knew herself. Only Jesus saw the meaning of the deed, and felt its glory in the love that filled it. Never forget, then, that we serve a Lord who can read the humblest actions gloriously. The Son of Man in the midst of the seven candlesticks has eyes as it were a flame of fire (Rev. i. 14). He sees in the simple deed, inspired by love, meanings and purposes we never dreamed of. He so interprets our poor and tangled service that we shall hardly know it in the morning. All which is fitted to make us very hopeful when, loving the Master, we first try to serve Him; and to restrain us from judging or troubling anybody when they serve in ways we fail to understand.

BUT the heart of this exquisite story lies in this, that this deed was the dying of Jesus, in a figure. It was not merely because love inspired it that Jesus crowned

it with unequalled praise. It was because He found in it the very spirit that was leading Him on so steadily to Calvary. Had Mary stopped to balance or to weigh, we should never have heard of the alabaster box. Had the gift been calculated to a nicety, it had never been part of the undying Gospel. But the love of Mary never asked *how little*; the love of Mary only asked *how much*. With a magnificent and glorious disregard, it broke the box and lavished everything. Now there is no need to make the alabaster a type and figure of the body of Jesus. It was not the *vase* that was like the body of Christ; it was the *act* that was kindred to His death. For Jesus, like Mary, never asked *how little*. He lavished everything in saving men. He gave with a glorious fulness like that of Mary's, when He gave Himself to the cross and to the grave. And wherever the love of Christ is known and felt, and the wonder of its lavish sacrifice awakens, 'there shall also this, that this woman hath done, be told for a memorial of her.'

THIRTIETH SUNDAY

Morning

SOLOMON'S FALL

Passages to be read : 1 Kings xi. 1-13, 41-43.

IN the book of Deuteronomy (xvii. 16-17) we have a portraiture of the kind of king whom the Israelites were to set upon their throne. He was to be one whom the Lord their God would choose. He was to be one of their own people, too, for in the kingship of Israel, as in that of the Kingdom of heaven, men must feel that there was a brother (Heb. ii. 11) on the throne. Then follow three negative marks, as we might call them; three things that the King of Israel was *not* to do; and it is these that leap into remembrance when we think of Solomon. In the first place, he was not to multiply horses, nor cause the people to go down to Egypt for horses. Secondly, he was not to multiply wives, lest his heart should turn away. And thirdly, while due regard was to be had to the requisite state and splendour of a king, he was not greatly to multiply to himself silver and gold.

NOW it is notable that these three prohibitions were conspicuously disregarded by King Solomon. Through all his glory, like a polluted stream among the sun-bathed hills, there ran a growing current of disobedience. There is an Arabian story of Solomon (and no life excepting that of Jesus has yielded such a wealth of striking legend), that he used to lean upon a staff of

ebony, and that a worm was gnawing at the centre of it. The worm was a symbol of the disobedience that was eating away the heart of all his power. The King of Israel was not to multiply horses—yet the horses and chariots of Solomon were reckoned by thousands (1 Kings x. 26). We have seen how Josephus, in telling of the glory of Solomon, quite revels in the splendours of his chariotry (Antiq. VIII. vii. 3). The King of Israel was not to multiply silver—yet Solomon made silver to be in Jerusalem as stones (1 Kings x. 27). And the King of Israel was not to multiply wives—yet Solomon had seven hundred wives (1 Kings xi. 3). Do you not feel the truth of the Arabian tale about the worm in the king's staff of ebony? Do you not see how hollow his grandeur was, when it was rooted in such a disobedience? I sometimes think that our Lord was not speaking of the *beauty* of the lilies merely, but was hinting at their purity and sweet dependence, and at their perfect obedience to the laws of the Creator, when He said that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these (Matt. vi. 29).

NOW there is a great saying of our Lord that might well be graven on our hearts to-day. 'A man's foes shall be they of his own household,' said Jesus; and 'he that loveth father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me' (Matt. x. 36-37). Christ means that love may ruin no less than hatred; for love may lessen (and finally may extinguish) the loyal devotion of the heart to Him. We have only to read the verses of our chapter to find that *that* was the secret of the ruin of Solomon. Solomon did not fall through cherishing hate; he fell through foolish and extravagant love (vs. 1 and 2). He set his affections (not without solemn warning) on those who had no reverence for the true God, until at last his loyalty was tarnished; his heart was no longer perfect towards the Lord (v. 4). Professor Drummond

used to give an illustration of the delight we take in the things of those we love. You tell a carpenter, he said, to make a chest for you, and when you get it there is something wrong with the lock, and there are ugly scratches on the varnish. And you are quite indignant at its workmanship, and refuse to take it off his hands. But an hour or two later your little brother comes, with a box which he has made with his own tools. And it isn't varnished, and it is quite off the square, and it cannot boast of any lock at all. But you are delighted with it—you never saw such a splendid box!—and it is *love*, says Drummond, that has made the difference. That is a picture of the delight we take in the imperfect things of any one we love. And it will help us to understand (what at first reading might almost seem incredible) how the heart of Solomon was turned from God and led to the idols in which his wives delighted.

LET it be noted, too, that our verses tell us that all this happened when Solomon was *old* (v. 4). How old he was, we cannot say precisely—certainly not more than sixty years of age. But the Bible means that he was old enough to have felt the worth of the friendship of Jehovah. When a boy has known another for a week and then deserts him for a new companion—even in that there is something of dishonour, it does not promise well for coming days. But when the friendship has been matured through years, and stood the test of many hours of strain, and been enriched with countless kindnesses—then to play false to it is utterly base. Now when the Bible tells us that Solomon was *old*, it means to hint that his conduct was like that. He was rejecting a friendship and a friend whose worth had been simply priceless in the past. It might have seemed impossible; but it happened. The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked (Jer. xvii. 9). It is never too late to mend, the proverb says; remember that it is never

too late to fall. Let us study this little poem of George Herbert's, which might be written over the tomb of Solomon:—

'Lord, with what care hast Thou begirt us round !

Parents first season us : then schoolmasters

Deliver us to laws ; they send us bound

To rules of reason, holy messengers.

Pulpits and Sundays, sorrow dogging sin,

Afflictions sorted, anguish of all sizes,

Fine nets and stratagems to catch us in,

Bibles laid open, millions of surprises.

Blessings beforehand, ties of gratefulness,

The sound of glory ringing in our ears ;

Without, our shame ; within, our consciences ;

Angels and grace, eternal hopes and fears.

Yet all these fences and their whole array

One cunning bosom-sin blows quite away.'

THIRTIETH SUNDAY

Evening

THE MARRIAGE FEAST

Passage to be read : Matt. xxii. 1-14.

THE parable of the Great Supper, recorded by St. Luke, so closely resembles the parable of to-day's lesson, that not a few students (Calvin among the number) have regarded the two as really one. But it is better to keep them quite distinct, and to believe that our Lord, on two separate occasions, enforced His teaching by a common figure. *That* parable was spoken at a meal; this one was spoken in the Temple. That one was uttered in the house of a Pharisee (Luke xiv. 7), and this one when the doors of all the Pharisees were locked

on Jesus, for the hostility of the Pharisees was at its height. In that one the host is a private man ; here the host is a king, and the occasion a wedding. Observe, too, how in this parable the thoughts of a *marriage* and of a *feast* are combined. For these two were the chosen emblems of the Old Testament in shadowing forth the blessings of the New. Just as our great poets, in picturing human life, have viewed it as a journey or a warfare ; so the Jewish prophets, in picturing the richer life of the New Covenant, described it as a feast or as a marriage. Here Jesus blends the two. With consummate skill, and yet with perfect simplicity, He makes one whole out of these scattered thoughts. And then He adds such inimitable touches, and gives such a deepened import to the scene, that while we thank God for all the prophets, we confess that never man spake like this man.

NOW observe first that *those who were called had been bidden long ago* (v. 3). It is quite in accord with the fashion of the East to repeat an invitation, *verbally*. Haman, for instance, in the story of Esther, is invited to a banquet on the morrow (v. 8), and when the hour has actually come, the chamberlain is sent to usher him to the feast (vi. 14). So Thomson, in *The Land and the Book*, notes how the friend at whose house he dined last evening sent a servant to call him when dinner was ready, and he goes on to say that where western manners have not modified the Oriental, the custom still prevails among the rich (I. ix.). Men were first bidden, therefore, and then were called ; it was the common custom at a great man's banquet. And Jesus teaches that God had acted so, in His gospel-invitation to the Jew. The Jews had been bidden since ever they were a nation. They had been bidden by every prophet and every sacrifice. They had been told that in the fulness of the time there was to be a banquet spread for them. Then came the calling by the twelve (Matt. x.) and by the seventy (Luke x.).

And the second calling by the other servants who were sent out after the Ascension. And in the treatment of Christianity by Jewry, we have the comment of history on verses five and six. Some *made light of it*—as the Jews mocked and said, ‘These men are full of new wine’ (Acts ii. 13). Others *took* the servants, as the Jews took Peter and John (Acts iv. 3), and as they cast Paul and Silas into prison at Philippi (Acts xvi. 23). And they *entreated them spitefully*, as the Jews stoned Paul at Lystra (Acts xiv. 19), and smote him on the mouth at the High Priest’s orders (xxiii. 2). And they *slew them*, as the Jews slew Stephen (Acts vii. 60), and James the brother of John (xii. 2). No wonder that the King was angry with these murderers. No wonder that Jerusalem was destroyed (v. 7).

NEXT note how *the wedding was furnished with unexpected guests*. If you had asked any of the crowd upon the highway (and note that the highways spoken of were *city streets*) whether they were going to the feast that night, I dare say they would have thought that you were mocking them. They knew that the marriage of the king’s son was near; they would have welcomed the opportunity of sharing in it; but they were poor; the king was too great to heed them; the light and the song and the joy were not for them. Then suddenly and unexpectedly the servants met them with the kingly summons; and the last men in the land who dreamed of it, found themselves seated in the royal hall. The others were not worthy (v. 8). What! were *these* worthy? Were not some of them bad and only *some* of them good (v. 10)? Ah, it was not their goodness which made them worthy; I think it was just their willingness to go. The only test of worthiness with God is a man’s desire to accept His invitation. A man may be dowered with every gift and talent, and still be unworthy if he will not come. On the other hand, how bad soever a man be,

if he truly desire to sit with the King in light, God will accept that willingness as worthiness, and the man will be blessed for hungering and thirsting.

LASTLY, remark *the exact scrutiny of God*. It is very likely that, as each guest came in, a servant handed him a wedding garment. The garment would be a sleeveless cloak, to be thrown lightly over the other dress. We have traces of some such custom in the Bible (2 Kings x. 22), and modern travellers who have gone as ambassadors to the King of Persia (for example), have told how they had to conform to similar usage. Now, what this garment signified, we need not ask. I believe (with Spurgeon) that if our Lord had had one thing only in His mind, He would have told us more plainly what that one thing was. The wedding garment is anything indispensable; anything whatever without which we cannot be Christ's, and which the unrenewed heart is unwilling to accept. But the point to note is that when the king came in, he saw immediately the *one* offender. No crowding of strange men upon the couches, and no enthusiasm of joyful welcome, blinded him to the *one* rebel for an instant. 'Friend,' he said gently, 'how camest thou in hither?' Was it thine own daring brought thee here? Or was it by some favour of the servants? And when the man had never a word to say—and silence is often confession, says Cicero—he was cast out of the brightness of the hall into the darkness (with its tears) of night. Let none of us, then, think to escape God. He sees us, knows us, follows us, one by one. Let us be sure that in simple faith and obedience we desire to do the whole will of the King, and when the King comes in, we shall be glad.

THIRTY-FIRST SUNDAY

Morning

THE PROPHET OF JUDAH

Passage to be read : 1 Kings xiii. 1-25.

NOW that the kingdom was rent in twain, Jeroboam felt the danger of having Jerusalem as the one religious centre. Who knew what memories of David might not revive when the people flocked to the capital of David? Might not the Temple, with its sweet associations, rekindle the old loyalty of the tribes? Jeroboam was astute enough to foresee the risk, and he took immediate steps to counteract it. He remembered how in the days of the judges there had been many religious centres in the land. He had lived in Egypt, too, where the sacred ox was worshipped; and was not his queen an Egyptian lady? Jeroboam resolved to erect two golden calves, the one at Bethel and the other at Dan, and instead of the Levites (who would have scorned the office) he appointed priests of the lowest of the people (xii. 31). It was a tragic mistake on Jeroboam's part to forget the consequences of the golden calf at Sinai; but the choice of Bethel was a sagacious choice, and would go far to quiet uneasy consciences. For not only was Bethel very strongly situated; it was also a very holy place. It had its precious memories of Abraham. It was the spot where Jacob saw the ladder. If once, then, there had been communion with heaven there, might not angel-footsteps fall there again? In that bright hope, thought Jeroboam, there might be virtue to keep the tribes from mourning for Jerusalem.

BUT the altar at Bethel was an ill-omened altar. The shadow of ruin was on it from the first. On the very morning of its inauguration, when Jeroboam stood with the incense ready, an unknown prophet of Judah strode forward from the crowd—and what a thrill ran through the people! He seemed to see nobody, not even the king. His eye was riveted upon the altar. He cried to it, ‘O altar, altar!’ and foretold that a child should be born of the house of David who would offer on it the bones of its ministering priests. Then, as a sign that the word was from the Lord, the altar was rent, and the ashes on it scattered. Well for the people, as the ashes were drifted over them by the mountain breeze, had they thought that ashes were the symbol of repentance! Jeroboam was furious; he pointed to the intruder; he cried to his retinue to seize him. But in that instant his outstretched and pointing arm was withered, and was only healed at the prophet’s intercession. Then the unknown herald disappeared, refusing all kingly offers of entertainment; and the passage concludes with a pitiful tragedy that opened in disobedience and closed in death. Two centuries later the altar was rent again. Then came Josiah who ‘stamped it small to powder,’ and who took the bones of the priests out of their sepulchres, and burned them there. So was fulfilled ‘the word of the Lord, which the man of God proclaimed’ (2 Kings xxiii. 15-16).

NOW let us note three lessons here, and first, *the same temptations will come back again*. This unnamed prophet was tempted by the king, and he had the strength and courage to be firm. God had bidden him accept no hospitality, and he was true to the bidding of his Lord so far. No doubt he felt the strength of having conquered; there was something of the glow of victory upon him. He could lay aside his spiritual armour now, and take a little ease under the oak-tree. And it was *then*, just when

he seemed victorious, that the same temptation leaped back on him again. The battle with self and ease had to be refought, and he had slackened his grip upon his sword. It was the very temptation meeting him again that he was congratulating himself on having conquered; I think the man was lost, because he won. Now that is a lesson in temptation for us all. Satan is rarely content with one assault. He sometimes lets himself be beaten in the *first*, just to get us at greater advantage in the *second*. Never cease watching. Beware of that oak-tree. The time has not come to be pleased with our little victories. Some day we shall sit under His shadow with great delight; but to-day our Lord is saying to us, 'Watch!'

NEXT mark *how others may be ruined by our falsehood.*

When the old prophet went after the prophet of Judah, he told him that the Lord had bidden him come. This was not an invitation from the king; it was an invitation (he said) from the King of kings. But, says the Scripture, he lied unto him (v. 18). Now what was the purpose of that lie, I hardly know. There was all manner of treachery behind it. The old prophet would be a poorer man for ever, for having taken God's name in vain like that. But what I want you to note is this, that the *brother*-prophet was ruined by that lie. It was that lie that led him into danger; it was that lie that cost him his life. Let us learn, then, that in every falsehood, we are doing certain injury to others. Some one suffers, be quite sure of it, every time you tell a lie. Not only for your own sakes, but for *others'* sakes, determine, whatever it costs, never to deceive. We serve others just by being true.

THEN lastly—and this is the main lesson—*our safety lies in simple obedience.* The prophet of Judah was a true prophet of God. God had honoured him by giving him this work. Still more, God granted him the power

of working miracles—the altar was rent and the king's hand restored. Surely with all these gifts and signs of favour, the prophet might think himself tolerably safe? Yet, spite of them all, what a terrible end he came to—and all because of disobedience. Learn, then, that our gifts may be our danger; our talents or genius may be our peril, if we ever think that in the strength of these we can dare be disobedient to God. It is the brightest and the cleverest people—it is those whom God has dowered most liberally—it is *they* who are often tempted to be careless, and to take their ease under the oak-tree. God teaches us that gifts are no safeguard. The brightest must obey just like the dullest. For the greatest genius, as for the poorest dunce, there is only one road to safety and to happiness. It is to obey God unswervingly. It is to follow Jesus all the way.

THIRTY-FIRST SUNDAY

Evening

THE TEN VIRGINS

Passage to be read : Matt. xxv. 1-13.

THE ceremonies at a marriage in the East were very different from those we are accustomed to, and the more clearly we can picture one of these Eastern weddings, the better we shall understand this parable. There was no religious service, as with us; no priest or minister was present. The essential thing was that the bridegroom should lead his bride from her father's house to his own. Hence the old phrase, 'to *take* a wife,' was literally true in Eastern countries, and we know that to this day, among the Arabs, the bride is *taken* as if she were an enemy—captured after some

show of violence, and removed as a prisoner to her husband's home. Among the Jews, the bridegroom, with his friends (John iii. 23), went to the home of his bride in the late evening. It was dark, and lights were needed for the procession—which lights, among the Greeks and Romans (as the boys who are reading Latin poetry know) were generally torches; but among the Jews were more commonly lamps. The bride was waiting for the bridegroom there, in a white dress, decked out in all her jewels; and John would recall many a village scene when he wrote that the wife of the Lamb was arrayed in fine linen, clean and *white* (Rev. xix. 8), and that the New Jerusalem came down from heaven prepared as a bride adorned for her husband (Rev. xxi. 2). Then the bridegroom led his bride into the street, with her maiden friends bearing her company, amid music and a score of flashing lights. And as the procession made its way back to the bridegroom's home, through the crowds who had poured out to see the bridal party, a little group of maidens at this corner, and a few more who had been waiting in that court, joined themselves to the happy company, and passed on with it to share in the marriage feast.

THIS, then, was the homely scene that Jesus transfigured in this exquisite parable, and the ten virgins, who take the chief place in it, may either (as many have thought) have been attending the bride in her own home that evening, or they may have formed one of those little bands that waited for the return of the procession. Will the reader please observe that number *ten*? It is a favourite number in the Bible. When Abraham's servant went on his great journey, he took ten camels of the camels of his master (Gen. xxiv. 10). When the kinsman of Ruth desired to deal with Boaz, he took ten men of the elders of the city (Ruth iv. 2). The dragon in Revelation had ten horns (Rev. xii. 3).

There were ten lepers who were cleansed by Jesus (Luke xvii. 12). The commandments were ten, and the talents and pounds were ten, and here our Lord says there were ten virgins. Now we are not told that these ten were good and bad; but we are told that five were *wise* and five were *foolish*, and we recall another parable where we read of a wise and of a foolish builder (Matt. vii. 24-27). The strange thing is that the foolish as well as the wise, here, had each her lamp, and it was burning merrily. The sad thing is that the foolish were not prepared for a quite possible, and indeed quite common, delay. The night deepened, and still there was no bridegroom. The wisest of them nodded off into sleep. Then at midnight there rang the cry, 'Behold the bridegroom!' and in a twinkling every eye was open. No lamp *was* out, but all were *going* out (read v. 8 in the Revised Version). The wick even of the wise was sputtering. But then the wise had little flasks of oil with them; it was the work of a moment to trim their lamps. But the foolish had no oil, and there was none to borrow, and when they hurried out to buy it at the merchant's—can you not hear the jesting of the crowd? And while they went to buy, the bridegroom came; and they that were ready went in with him to the marriage, and the door was shut.

NOW I trust that no one will spoil this matchless story by arguing what the lamp or what the oil must be. I do not think that Jesus built up His parables laboriously. It is better to keep to the broad lessons of a parable, and there are three here which any one may grasp. The first is, *want of forethought is true foolishness*. Can you tell me why the one *builder* was a foolish man (Matt. vii. 26)? It was just because he never foresaw the storm. He built in the May-time, when the birds were singing, and the sand was firm enough for summer weather; but he forgot November and its gales, when

nothing could stand but a house upon a rock. So here the foolish virgins had their lamps, and their lamps were burning merrily enough. But they forgot to reckon with a tardy bridegroom, and it was just that want of forethought that spoiled all. Now none of us is to be *anxious* for to-morrow. The speaker of this parable taught that. But we have a strange and difficult life to live, and we have a death to die and a God to meet, and it is high time to make provision for all that. Have you done it? You know perfectly what the provision is. 'Evil is wrought by want of thought, as well as want of heart.'

AND the second lesson of the story is this: *in the great hours we cannot help each other.* I have no doubt the ten were all good friends; they had done many a kindly turn one to another. But *now*, that friendship was of no avail; there was no oil to borrow or to spare. It was *not* because the wise disdained the foolish, or were eager to see them ousted from the marriage, that they were deaf to this request for oil. They refused it for a far better reason—they needed every drop of oil they had. That means, that in every hour of judgment, there is no shining with a borrowed light. The help of others is priceless in many things, but in the hours of spiritual crisis it is vain. *Another's* faith can never aid us then, even though that other be a friend or father. It is our *own* faith and holiness and love that will determine matters when the Bridegroom comes.

THEN, lastly, and this is the great lesson of the parable, *it is the highest wisdom to be watchful.* The bridegroom came when no one looked for him, and Jesus will come in an hour we think not of. The *one* day has been hidden, said Augustine, that *every* day might be regarded. How little did Pompeii think, in the bright morning, of the desolation the evening was to bring!

With what awful suddenness, in 1666, did the great fire devastate London! And like a bridegroom in the night, Jesus will come. God grant He find us vigilant!

‘ Watch ! ’tis your Lord’s command,
And while we speak, He ’s near ;
Mark the first signal of His hand,
And ready all appear.’

THIRTY-SECOND SUNDAY

Morning

THE FAMINE

Passage to be read: 1 Kings xvii. 1-24.

WHEN a prophet is brought on to the scene of Scripture, we generally hear something of his ancestry; but Elijah stands before us without a word of preface: like Melchisedec he is 'without father without mother' (Heb. vii. 3). So unusual is this sudden introduction, that some of the Jews fancied he was an angel, and James may have been thinking of that when he wrote that Elijah was a man of like passions with ourselves (James v. 17). The *name* Elijah means 'Jehovah is my God,' and the name rings true to his mission and his character. His life was one long struggle against idolatry, and Jehovah-nissi—God was his banner. Here then he steps out under that banner, in a chapter that we all have by heart. What lessons does Elijah's God wish us to gather from the story of Cherith and Sarepta?

FIRST then there is *the need of quiet retirement before service*. Moses before he was called to lead the Israelites, spent forty years in retirement in the desert. When Paul was converted and chosen to be God's messenger, he was led away into the quiet distance of Arabia. Our Lord Himself, after his baptism, was driven of the Spirit into the wilderness, where He was tempted of the

devil forty days. Just so Elijah, beginning his life's work, and with all the bitterness and stress of it before him, was bidden by God to go and *hide* himself—his life must first be hid with Christ in God. Where Cherith is, no traveller can tell. It is enough to remember that the name means *separated*. The burn would babble and whisper to the prophet ceaselessly, and all its whispering would be *separation*. Here, then, Elijah was prepared in solitude. His trust in a God who could provide, was deepened. It was at Cherith that

‘he learned to feel
What he could ne'er express, yet could not all conceal.’

MARK next *that ordinary things are sometimes given in extraordinary ways*. What food sustained the prophet at the brook? It was bread and flesh, morning and evening. It was not angels' food by any means; it was the wholesome fare of any working Israelite. There was not a mother in Israel but could have baked the bread, there was not a market but supplied such meat. The strange thing was not the food Elijah got; the strange thing was the way in which he got it. There was something intensely repugnant to a Jew in the thought of a raven being his caterer. Had it been a *clean* bird, it might have been less offensive; but the raven was unclean, and abhorred (Lev. xi. 13; Isa. xxxiv. 11). Yet by these offensive channels the food was brought; the prophet was sustained by what he loathed. Do we not often get our common blessings thus? Does not God bring them by offensive messengers? Did you never know any one winning strength and sweetness from providences as dark as any raven's wing? There are some who would change these ravens into Arabians, and others will have it that they were kindly merchants; but when I think of the dark plumage of sorrow (and how we loathe the beating of its wings), and then remember what daily strength and beauty is conveyed to

the children of God by that sad messenger, it is better to leave the Arabians their liberty, and (with Christ) consider the fowls of the air.

THEN note that *there are stores that increase in the using of them.* When Elijah met with the woman of Zarephath she was trembling on the verge of destitution. She had nothing left but a little meal in the barrel, and a little oil in the bottom of her cruse. When *that* was done, there was nothing between her and death—no wonder that her little boy fell sick! Now had she refused to use that morsel, when the prophet, in the name of the Eternal, asked for it, it had been farewell to the sunlight for them both. But she believed with a very noble faith, she cast herself upon the promise, wholly; no doubt there was an indefinable air about the prophet that made her feel he was asking with authority. Then morning by morning, in the barrel, there was enough meal to give her her daily bread; and in the cruse always sufficient oil to give her daily the oil of joy for mourning; until at last, when she reviewed the months, and remembered all she had taken from the barrel, she would learn the lesson we all need to learn that there is he that scattereth and yet increaseth. Have you no talents and powers and faculties and senses that are like the barrel in Sarepta, and the cruse? Is there nothing in your house (the house of brain and character) that will fail, unless you trust God and use it? There is a terrible epitaph on an old Roman tomb, 'Quod edi et bibi, mecum habeo'—what I ate and drank I have with me. But I am certain that the widow of Sarepta would never write *that* upon her headstone. She had learned the truth of these words of John Wesley, 'What I gave away, I have still.' Are any of us beginning to find that?

THIRTY-SECOND SUNDAY

Evening

THE TALENTS

Passage to be read : Matt. xxv. 14-30.

TO understand this parable we must remember that the servants spoken of were really *slaves*. It might seem a strange act on the part of this proprietor to intrust his goods to *servants*, in our modern sense; but in the old world the slaves had far more power, and were intrusted with far greater responsibilities, than commonly fall to the lot of servants in our homes. In the Latin plays of Plautus and of Terence the slave is a constantly recurring character; and even in the Bible, we find the slave occupying very confidential posts. Abraham's slave is the steward of his household (Gen. xv. 2). We read in Proverbs of slaves acting as teachers (Prov. xvii. 2). And Ziba, the slave of Saul, who himself had fifteen sons and twenty servants, was put in charge of the goods of Mephibosheth, very much as the servants are, in this parable (2 Sam. ix. 2, 10). We must try then to realise these old-world ways, if we wish this parable to be a living story.

IT makes an interesting study for us, too, to compare this passage with that which precedes it. The story of the Ten Virgins and the tale of the Talents were either spoken by Jesus at the same time, or else were designedly placed side by side by Matthew, who felt that each threw light upon the other. For the former is a parable of *watching*, and the latter is a parable of *working*—and every Christian watcher is meant to work, and every Christian worker is bound to watch. And

the former centres in the *heart-supplies*, while the latter moves in the sphere of *outward service*, as if to indicate that, in the Christian life, the heart must always come before the hand. Why did the five foolish virgins fail? Because they were over-sanguine and easy. Why did the man of the one talent fail? Because he was over-careful and afraid. Thus Jesus, in His infinite compassion, moves round the whole circle of the heart in warning. I need nothing more than a study of the parables to assure me that He knew what was in man.

NOTE, first, *how our gifts are proportioned to our power of using them.* In the parable of the Pounds, which we have studied in Luke, you remember that each man got one pound. That is to say, there are certain things (what were they?) that the wisest and the weakest share alike. But here, one man gets five talents, the second gets two, the third gets only one; but they get according to their several ability (v. 15). Now I think that Jesus meant us to learn from that that all we have is wisely and justly given. He wanted to teach us that all our several differences, which sort us out into such strange variety, are not the work of any accident, but of the discriminating hand of God. Are any two girls in the Sunday-school the same? Is not one brighter, stronger, quicker, than the other? It was that which flashed before the mind of Jesus, when He made this householder give different sums. We are not to be jealous of another's gifts. We are not to think how happy we would be, if only we were like—put in the name yourself. We are to remember that all we have is God's, and God has given us all that we could use. The question is, How are you using it? Are you trying to be faithful in the *least*? Then, 'because thou hast been faithful over few things, I will make thee ruler over many things. Enter thou into the joy of thy Lord.'

A GAIN, mark *how non-use is misuse*. In the parable of the unjust steward (Luke xvi.), the steward is accused of wasting his master's goods. In the parable of the prodigal son (Luke xv.), the son recklessly squanders the portion he had got. But *here*, there is no wasting and no squandering; the slave returns every penny he received; yet his lord calls him a wicked and slothful servant (v. 26). Learn, then, that it is not enough to *have* a gift; the gifts of God are given to be *used*. God is angry, not only when a talented man does wrong: He is angry when a talented man does *nothing*. The sure way to have a gift withdrawn, is to be too lazy or too timid to employ it—not to use, at last spells not to have. Henry Drummond used to tell us about the fish in the great caves of Kentucky, and how their eyes were perfectly formed, and yet the fish were blind. They had never used their eyes in the dark caves; the gift of sight that God had given them had been unexercised for generations, until at last non-use became misuse, and the power of seeing passed away.

‘ Heaven doth with us as we with torches do ;
Not light them for themselves ; for if our virtues
Did not go forth of us, ’twere all alike
As if we had them not.’

A GAIN, observe *how we misknow God unless we try to serve Him*. I do not know what the slave who got five talents thought of his master in his secret heart. But I know that when he did his best with the trust his master had committed to him, he found his master far more generous and far kinder than he had ever dreamed. But the slave of the one talent said: ‘ I *know* my lord (v. 24). I know his temper and his character exactly.’ And it was *he* (who was sure he knew his lord so well) who missed all that was most generous in him! That means, that if we never try to do God's will, we shall never know Him in His love and tenderness. The worst

of burying our talent is, that it always keeps us from knowing God aright. Do we wish to find what a loving God He is? Do we wish to feel what joy He can bestow? Then we must be in earnest with every gift we have; we must trade with it, and take the risks. Slothfulness always misinterprets God—'I knew thee that thou art an hard man.' I wonder if the other two would have subscribed to that, when they were summoned into their Master's joy?

THEN, lastly, note *how Jesus uplifts language*. If you had asked the boys and girls of Nazareth what the meaning of that word 'talent' was, they would have told you it meant a great sum of money—about two hundred and forty pounds with us. But *now* we speak of a very 'talented' boy, or we say of a man that he has splendid 'talents,' and it was Jesus who, in this little parable, lifted the word into these nobler meanings. When He found the word, it signified gold and silver; but when He left it, all gifts and graces were in it. That upward sweep is very Christlike. It is just what Jesus has always loved to do with words, and lives, and all the world. What He did for the word 'talent' by one parable, He is waiting to do for you this very day.

THIRTY-THIRD SUNDAY

Morning

ELIJAH'S DESPAIR

Passage to be read : 1 Kings xix. 1-21.

WHAT first arrests us in this chapter is *the sudden change in the spirit of Elijah*. When we last saw him he was in the glow of triumph. He was standing alone against the prophets of Baal, fearless when every power seemed hostile to him. *Now* he is flying from the rage of Jezebel ; his victory has changed into dismay. When Knox had his second interview with Queen Mary of Scotland, and spoke to her in a bold and fearless way, some Papists standing by said, 'He is not affrayed.' Knox turned on them and answered, 'Why should the pleasing face of a gentlewoman affray me? I have looked in the faces of many angry men, and yet have not been affrayed above measure.' But Elijah, who had also confronted many angry men, lost heart when he heard the threatenings of Jezebel, and in our chapter we have him flying for his life. It is a lesson in the peculiar danger that attends all passionate, impetuous, and ardent natures. For an eager temperament such as Elijah's was, there are few perils like the peril of reaction. Some men spend all their days in a gray light. There is little sunshine, and there is little gloom. Others are singing under a blue heaven *to-day*, and it is they whose sky will be all dark *to-morrow*. Just think of Simon Peter on the lake—how dauntless in venturing on to the waves to Jesus! And then the next moment what a change of

spirit—'Lord, save me, or I perish!' And as with Peter, so was it with Elijah. Great daring is followed by great despondency. Happy, that Elijah and Peter, and you and I, and all, are in the keeping of One who knoweth our frame.

NOTE next that *the cause of despondency was his seeming failure*. No doubt there was physical exhaustion in the case. God dealt with His servant in the utmost tenderness when He said to him, 'Arise and eat.' But deeper than that was a haunting sense of uselessness, a thought that the lessons of Carmel were in vain; a feeling that the new-born loyalty to God would pass, as its cry had passed and died in the mountain breeze. It was that feeling that rose to Elijah's lips when he moaned, 'I am no better than my fathers.' They had toiled and preached and died in the cause of God, and the land was sunk in idolatry after it all. Where *they* had failed, could *he* hope to succeed? Was not his hour of triumph but a ripple on the stream? *That* lay at the very roots of his despair—the bitter thought that his work had been in vain. Now there is not an earnest man or woman but has had seasons of that Elijah-mood, and in such seasons there is nothing so inspiring as to think of the seeming failure of the work of Jesus. He, like Elijah, had had His hours of triumph. The very children had cried, 'Hail to the Son of David.' But on Mount Calvary, as on Mount Horeb here, the toil and the triumph seemed to have been in vain. But we know that in that failure there was victory. The Cross was to be the throne, when all was done. That is, we serve a Lord who seemed to fail, but who was never more powerful than then.

REMARK, again, how *Elijah, out of his darkness, won new views of God*. When we see the prophet standing on Mount Carmel, we feel that the true God, for

him, is strong and terrible. He is the jealous God, the God of judgment, the God who says, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay.' He sanctions the slaying of the prophets of Baal. He reveals Himself as a consuming fire. Then when Elijah flies, to what point does he make? It is surely no chance that he travels to Mount Horeb. Was it not there, in that scene of desolate grandeur, that the stern law of a just God had been revealed? The God of Elijah was a God of law and judgment, and God is always and for ever that. But in our heavenly Father there is more than that; there are gentler and tenderer and sweeter attributes, and we grasp them but feebly in our hours on Carmel; like the stars, they shine most brightly in the dark. So at Horeb rose all the terrors of the storm. But Elijah felt that God was not in that. And an earthquake loosened the rocks and crashed them together. But Elijah felt that God was not in that. Then flashed the lightning, and the mountain echoes pealed out the rolling thunder, and the terrified merchant, caught in the storm at Sinai, would call it the voice of the Lord dividing the flames of fire (Ps. xxix.). But even in that, Elijah felt not God. Then came the still, small voice, and God was there. God was revealed in gentleness and peace. On Carmel He had been a God of fire; but at Horeb He would not strive nor cry nor lift up His voice. Was it not worth while being led out to the desert to win that grander thought about Jehovah? Would not duty and life, and death and everything, be different to Elijah from that hour? It is one of the gains of our losses—of all hours like this hour of Elijah's—that we learn something about God in them that is never taught us in the triumphs on Carmel.

LASTLY, observe that *God showed Elijah that he was not alone*. When Christian was in the Valley of the Shadow of Death, says Bunyan, he thought he heard the voice of a man on before him saying, 'Though I walk

through the valley, I will fear no evil.' And Bunyan says that Christian was glad then, for he gathered that some one who feared God was in the valley as well as himself. Just so Elijah, in *his* valley of the shadow, despairingly thought, 'I, even I, only am left' (v. 10). And God comforted and cheered him with the assurance that in the valley there were thousands like himself (v. 18). Now when a boy or girl comes out for Christ, or takes a stand for what is pure and good, they sometimes seem to be standing quite alone. And often it is just that thought of being alone that makes it so hard to go forward gallantly. But you may be sure that you are not alone. In the same school, perhaps in the same class, are others who are with you in the fight. You may not know them any more than Elijah did. But God will show you your comrades in good time. Meantime, and quite apart from that, no one who is struggling to be good is solitary. 'Lo, *I* am with you alway, even to the end of the world.'

THIRTY-THIRD SUNDAY

Evening

THE WASHING OF THE DISCIPLES' FEET

Passage to be read: John xiii. 1-20.

FROM this point onward, in the Gospel of St. John, we have the private intercourse of Jesus with His disciples. When one is leaving for a distant country, and has transacted all necessary business with the outside world, he is fain to spend the few remaining hours in the sweet intimacy of the family circle. So Jesus, when the shadows of His departure stole around Him, dwelt in loving communion with His own. It is to this that John is pointing when he says (v. 1), 'Having

loved His own which were in the world, He loved them *unto the end.*' He does not mean until the end of life. He means unto the end and limit of all love. Christ's love, like His life, is endless and unchangeable. There is no yesterday and no to-morrow in its depths. But in the latter hours of that now shadowed intercourse there was such outwelling of the eternal passion, that John felt that its tides were at the full. Christ always loved them; now He loved them utterly. That was the thought borne in on the disciple. Yet mark that this uttermost showing of Jesus' love did not lie in unchecked and passionate avowals, but in an action of the lowliest service, and in teaching that would make the loved ones strong. The noblest love must always keep its secrets. It becomes weak when it protests too much. The love of Jesus is the perfect pattern of what the love of every young man and woman ought to be. Note, too, that in this little prologue (vs. 1-3), there is the note of *knowledge* as well as of love. The proverb has it that love is blind; but the love of Jesus was very far from that. He *knew* that the hour was come that He should depart (v. 1). He *knew* that the Father had given all things into His hands (v. 3). He *knew* who should betray Him (v. 11). It was under the illumination of that knowledge that Jesus washed the feet of John and Judas. Does not that augment the wonder of the deed? Does it not set the crown upon its lowliness? Though He was rich, yet for our sakes He became poor, that we through His poverty might be made rich.

WHILE supper, then, was proceeding, on the night before the Passover (for so we ought to translate it, instead of 'supper being ended,' v. 2), Jesus rose from table to perform this deed. Now the customary time for washing the feet of guests—and where men wore sandals and the heat was sweltering it was a very grateful and a very gracious practice—the customary moment for cleans-

ing the feet was not *during* the mealtime, but *before* it. Here, then, there had been some little delay. The service had been omitted on this occasion. And I feel certain it had been omitted because no disciple was lowly enough to offer it. Probably it was about this very hour that they were disputing who should be the greatest (Luke xxii. 24). They were men like ourselves (we may thank God for it), and they had almost everything yet to learn. And was Peter, who had been arguing for his precedence, going to stoop down and wash the feet of John? And was John (who had his own thoughts about the traitor) going to play the servant to Iscariot? It was intolerable. It was impossible. They were willing to do much, but never *that*. So with hot feet (and hotter hearts) they went to supper, and Jesus saw it all and loved them still. Then Jesus rose and laid aside His garments. The bitterest rebukes are deeds, not words. He poured the water into a bason. He took the towel and girded Himself for service. And I think that when John, in his revelation on Patmos, saw the Son of Man girt with a golden girdle (Rev. i. 13), he would recall this girding at the supper. So Jesus (whose own feet were to be pierced so soon) washed His disciples' feet, and dried them. Did He say to Himself, as He washed the feet of Thomas, 'These feet will be beautiful upon the distant mountains'? Or did He say, as He dried the feet of Judas, 'These will soon lead the mob into the Garden'? I do not know. But I am sure that in the stern and stormy years to come, not one of the eleven would ever have his tired feet laved, but he would recall this memorable hour.

MEANWHILE Jesus was approaching Peter, and the eleven were wondering what Peter would do. Perhaps Peter had been the noisiest in asserting that they would never catch *him* playing the foot-washer. And now, what a tumult there was in Peter's breast. What a tangle of good and evil in the man. All that was best in

him (his reverence for his Lord), and all that was worst in him (his pride), made him draw up his foot as if the Hand had stung it. But there was one thing that was all the world to Peter. It was the friendship of his glorious Master. And his Master (who is the unrivalled Master of the heart) touched, with His exquisite tenderness, that chord. 'If I wash thee not, Peter, thou hast no part with Me.' The very suggestion stabbed like a dagger. Peter thrust out his hands and bent down his head to Jesus: 'Lord, not my feet only, but my hands and head.' Then Jesus teaches the lesson of the bath (v. 10). If a man has bathed, and *then* has soiled his feet, must he plunge his whole body into the bath again? Will he not be truly cleansed (after his bath) if the particular defilement be removed? So, once and for all, a man is justified; once and for all, he is regenerated. And it is the stain here and the defilement there (contracted on the hot and dusty highway) that the risen Saviour cleanses every sunset.

NOW let us note three lessons in the story. And first, *we may not understand Christ at the time* (v. 7). There is not a child but must do a hundred tasks that she cannot see the worth and meaning of. There is not a mother but might croon to her little baby, 'What I do, thou knowest not now.' Do not wonder, then, if Christ acts as our mothers do. All children live by faith and not by sight. Next notice *Christ's condition of having part with Him*. 'If I wash thee not, thou hast no part with Me.' It is not, 'If I *teach* or *lead* thee not'—far less is it, 'If I *love* thee not.' The one condition of partnership with Jesus is to be cleansed by His spirit and His blood. Last, note *Christ's call to loving and lowliest service*. That is the centre and sum of the whole story. 'If I then, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet, ye ought also to wash one another's feet' (v. 14). We sometimes talk of the language of the hands. And sometimes of

the language of the eyes. But I think there is also a language of the feet, and I could translate the whole Gospel into it. For first comes Jesus (when we are bowed with sin) and He says: 'Son of man, stand upon thy feet.' And then comes Jesus (when we wish to serve Him), and He says to us, 'Wash one another's feet.' And then in the morning, when we are His for ever, it is at His feet that we shall cast our crowns.

THIRTY-FOURTH SUNDAY

Morning

NABOTH'S VINEYARD

Passage to be read: 1 Kings xxi. 1-20.

THE public ministry of Elijah was now practically over. He had stood for God on Carmel, and won the nation to its old allegiance. He had gained, at Horeb, such a new insight into the character of the Eternal, that the name of God would be richer ever after. He had cast his mantle on Elisha the son of Shaphat, in token that Elisha was to take up the work. But just as Jesus, before He left the earth, had a last word of warning and of prophecy to speak, so Elijah comes back into view again to utter a doom upon Ahab and his house. Many great preachers have begun with fiery sermons, and closed their ministry with a sweeter and gentler message. They have had their vision in some Horeb mystical, and have never forgotten, since, the still small voice. But Elijah, after *his* vision on the mount, was made the herald of this awful doom; and just because of the still small voice at Horeb, it must have been doubly hard to execute it. Sometimes, then, our growing experience of God makes it not easier but harder to be faithful. There are some plain duties that only grow more irksome as our vision of the eternal things enlarges. It is when the sky is blue and the summer birds are singing that the schoolroom and the lesson-books are most odious. And there are tasks that never seem so harsh as when the love of heaven has begun to flood our world. I am sure that Elijah must

have felt that here. Obedience to this terrible call was hard. Like Jesus very near the end of *His* journey, he may have prayed that the cup might pass from him, yet 'Not my will, but Thine, be done.'

NABOTH, then (and his name perhaps means *fruits*), was a native of the little town of Jezreel. He was not a wealthy man, but he owned a vineyard that lay on the sloping hillside to the east of the city. It had been handed down from sire to son; it was the cherished inheritance of Naboth's family; the earliest memories of Naboth's childhood were linked with these climbing and clustering vines. Now on the same side of the city of Jezreel, and forming part of the city-wall, was King Ahab's palace; and the royal pleasure-grounds stretching down the hill and forming a pleasant prospect from the palace-windows, touched on, and probably to some extent enclosed, the strip of land that was so dear to Naboth. I hardly think we should call it greed in Ahab to wish to add that vineyard to his policies. He was perfectly willing to pay good value for it, or to give Naboth a better vineyard in exchange. It is not an uncommon thing for great proprietors to effect little excambions like that. But in Israel the land was held from God in a way more direct than we can realise. The law denounced the selling of inheritances just because Jehovah was proprietor. 'The land shall not be sold for ever, said the Lord, for the land is mine' (Lev. xxv. 23). It was not, then, family pride or ancestral feeling or any happy memories of childhood—it was not *these* that made Naboth balk the king. It was the fear of disobeying the Lord who had so often spoken to him among his vines. And doubtless, resting in his vineyard, he had had glimpses of strange sights in the king's palace. He had seen with his own eyes what idolatry led to, whenever the queen was at home in her palace at Jezreel. And Naboth felt that his little plot of ground, so rich in prayer and fellowship

with God, so sanctified with sweet and holy memories, would be tainted and befouled and cursed for ever if it came into the hands of Jezebel.

SO Ahab was refused by a brave man, and took his refusal like a silly child. He went to bed and sulked like a great baby. The Roman Tacitus says about Felix *jus regium servili ingenio exercuit*—he played the king in the spirit of a slave; and that was as true of Ahab as of Felix. But there was a stronger spirit by Ahab's side—the Lady Macbeth of ancient Jewish story. And when she heard what ailed her lord, she could scarce suppress her scorn for his poor spirit. Had he ceased his feasting so as to move their pity? Let him take to his loved meat and drink again. 'Arise and eat bread and let thine heart be merry: I will give thee the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite.' Then follows the story of Jezebel's infamy, and how she suborned two false witnesses against Naboth. It reminds us of the tragedy of One against whom also two false witnesses were found (Matt. xxvi. 60). Naboth was accused of blasphemy and treachery—the same charges as were heaped on Jesus. He was condemned, and like Stephen was stoned to death outside the city wall. His property, as the property of a traitor, fell to the crown. King Ahab was the owner of the coveted vineyard. Owner: but not for long. Who is this first visitor to the king's new garden? It is Elijah, like an embodied conscience, to denounce the murder and tell of retribution. And how fearfully that retribution fell on Jezebel and Ahab and his house, the reader will find written in the book.

NOW note some of the things this passage teaches; and first, *how our disappointments test us*. It was said of Cromwell that the darker things became, the brighter and the steadier grew his hope. If he toiled all night and caught nothing, he was sure to see the Master

in the morning. But Ahab, baffled in one poor desire, lost heart and hope and showed himself a weakling. He was tried in the furnace of rebuff and was found wanting. Then note *how we mistake our enemies*—‘Hast thou found me, O mine enemy?’ Ahab cried to Elijah (v. 20). He thought Elijah was his worst of foes, and had he known it, he was his best of friends. And then see *what little things may ruin us*. For it is not a kingdom that is in question here; it is not any vast extent of territory; it is only a little plot of garden ground, and yet it meant the downfall of a king. Let us learn, then, the power of little things. Let us remember how weal or woe may hang on them. If a little vineyard played havoc with a dynasty, a little vice may play havoc with a life. Let no one say of anything wrong that it is *nothing*. The vineyard was a mere nothing to Ahab compared with his beautiful and spacious parks. Trifles, said Michael Angelo, make perfection. And trifles may spell out ruin at the end.

THIRTY-FOURTH SUNDAY

Evening

THE WAY, THE TRUTH, THE LIFE

Passage to be read: John xiv. 1-14.

NO one was more ready than Jesus to detect the anxieties of those He loved. We picture Him, as He taught the twelve, watching intently the expression on their faces to learn how far His words were understood. Jesus had noted, then, tokens of heart-distress (v. 1). The disciples felt His departure like a torture. And it was then that He consoled them with such simple and glorious speech that all Christendom is the debtor to their agony. *They* thought that His death was

an unforeseen calamity. Christ taught them it was the path of His own planning. They thought that heaven was very far away. Christ taught them it was but another room in the great home, of whose many mansions this beautiful world was one. He was not stepping out into the dark. He was passing from one room to another in the house. But the mightiest encouragement of all came when He told them, 'I go to prepare a place for you.' This, then, was the purpose of His going, that Love might have all things ready when they arrived. When a child is born here, love has got all things ready for it. It will be the same when we awaken in eternity. When a boy or a girl comes home from the boarding-school, has not some heart at home been busy in preparation? There is some one at the station, and the bedroom is arranged, and the lights are lit, and the table is spread, and all day there has been happy excitement in the home because James or Mary is coming home to-night. So Jesus says: 'I go to prepare a place for you. I go to have all things ready against your coming.' And though there are depths in these words we cannot fathom, and mysteries we cannot understand, they mean at least that Love is getting ready to give the children a real welcome home.

THEN Jesus utters the *Via Veritas Vita*: and first of all He says, 'I am the way.' It was the very word that the disciples wanted, for they all felt like wanderers that night. Do you know what it is like to lose the road? Did you ever, when out walking across the moors, find the track through the heather grow faint and disappear? There was a helplessness like that on the disciples, when Jesus announced that He was soon to leave them. So far, they had all walked with Jesus. *Now*, at the Cross, that pathway seemed to cease. We can hardly grasp the depth of comfort in it, when they heard that Christ was to be the Way for evermore. It

was in Him they were to fight and conquer. It was in Him they were to live and die. It was in Him they were to reach the glory and stand in the presence of the Father at the end. They felt there was a new and living way. One of the wonders of the old Roman people was the roads they made from end to end of Europe. And the Roman cities are in ruins now, and their palaces and their temples are destroyed, but men are still walking on the Roman ways. So Jesus, our Redeemer, is still the Way. A thousand things have gone, but that remains. It is through His death, and His rising from the dead, and through our daily fellowship with Him, that we walk heavenward, and reach home at last.

THEN Jesus says: 'I am the *truth*.' He does not say, observe, I *speak* the truth. There was a deeper meaning in His mind than that. I hope that every child will speak the truth, yet every child, as his experience grows, will discover with shame how untrue he is at heart. Christ is the sum and centre of all truth. Where Christ is *not*, there is a false note always. And one of the great joys of knowing Jesus is the sweet assurance that Truth is ours at last. Before the discovery of the law of gravitation, there were a thousand facts that no man could explain. There was no key to them. There was no plan in them. They could never be gathered into a worthy system. But when the great truth of gravitation was discovered—so simple, so universal, so sublime—a flood of light fell on the darkness, and disorder became order everywhere. And it is just so when we discover Jesus. *That* Truth sheds light upon a thousand facts. Things that were quite inexplicable once—sorrows and joys and hopes and fears and hauntings—become intelligible through this great discovery. Did not some one say that if you would find the truth you must seek for it at the bottom of a deep well? The glory of the

truth that is in Jesus is, that it is found in no dark *well*, but on the *way*. *Quid est veritas?* asked jesting Pilate. And in one of the best anagrams the world has ever had, the answer is given, *Est vir qui adest*.

THEN lastly Jesus says: 'I am the *life*.' In Thackeray's great story, *Vanity Fair*, we read of Amelia Osborne and her baby George. And Thackeray, speaking of the baby, says, 'How his mother nursed him and dressed him and *lived upon him* need not be told here. This child was her *being*.' That is a little picture of the way in which one person can be the life of another. It helps us to understand what Jesus meant when He said to the disciples, 'I am the life.' There is no book in any literature so filled with the message of life as the New Testament. If there is one word that sums up the Gospel, it is life. And here we are taught that that life is *in* Jesus Christ. He is the source of it. It is treasured in Him. And there is no way to gain it and to keep it but by trusting and by loving Him.

'I cannot solve mysterious things,
That fill the schoolmen's thoughts with strife;
But oh! what peace this knowledge brings—
Thou art the Life!
Hid in thy everlasting deeps,
The silent God His secret keeps.

The Way, the Truth, the Life, Thou art!
This, this I know; to this I cleave;
The sweet, new language of my heart—
"Lord, I believe."
I have no doubt to bring to Thee;
My doubt has fled, my faith is free!

THIRTY-FIFTH SUNDAY

Morning

AHAB'S DEATH

Passages to be read: 1 Kings xxii. 1-23, 29-36.

FROM the time of the rash truce, of which we read in the twentieth chapter (v. 34), there was peace between Israel and Syria for three years. But Ahab was still a strong and vigorous man; he was probably about fifty years old at this time, and there was one thing that embittered the peace for him, and made him long for another fight with Syria. All peace made in dishonourable ways carries the seed of future wars in it. The man who tries to patch up a false peace with *God* will move into fiercer antagonism by and by. Well, the thing that rankled with Ahab was Ramoth-Gilead, a commanding fastness on the east of Jordan. Ahab could not brook to think that Ramoth should be in the hands of Syria. Ramoth had been a city of refuge once (Deut. iv. 43). It was identified with the long history of Israel. Had he known what was to have happened at Ramoth, he might have been well content to let it be. He was not the first man, and he was not the last, to set his heart on the thing that was to ruin him. Who knows what my Ramoth-Gilead is? Who knows what yours is? Something we covet and would win at any cost. But God in His mercy is going to deny us, else our battle would end pitifully, like Ahab's.

NOW when we are set on doing what is wrong, there is generally some one ready to help us forward. If Jesus had had a thought of shunning Calvary, what help He would have got from Simon Peter! So when Ahab was brooding and pondering and doubting, and wondering if he were strong enough to assail Syria, who should appear, with quite a splendid retinue, but Jehoshaphat, the King of Judah. There was some kinship already between the two kings—the son of the one had married the daughter of the other—and Jehoshaphat, whatever his character was, was clearly a man of great resources. Here was the chance that Ahab had been longing for. Here was the hour for Syria come at last. Jehoshaphat agreed to give his help. The expedition was determined there and then. Ahab felt that he was sure of victory, with that united army at his back.

BUT the conscience of Jehoshaphat was not quite clear until the mind of the Lord was ascertained. It was for Ahab to sweep these scruples aside by his imposing muster of four hundred prophets. That these were not the prophets of Baal is evident: the context shows that they *professed* to serve the Lord. But it is just as evident that they were *not* God's messengers, for no true messenger of God is a king's flatterer. Did Nathan flatter? Or Elijah? Or John the Baptist? Did John Knox flatter princes? Or Andrew Melville? Flattery is always treachery, and utterly abhorrent to the God of truth. Note, too, how one of these false prophets appeared with horns of iron on his forehead. It was meant to illustrate the message he bore just like the pictures in the story-books. You remember how Ahijah rent his garment in twelve pieces to signify the rending of the kingdom (1 Kings xi. 30). And Jeremiah hid the girdle by Euphrates (Jer. xiii.), and shattered the vessel in the Vale of Hinnom (xix.), and appeared in public with a yoke upon his neck (xxvii.). So here, the ingenious Zedekiah got the black-

smith to fashion a pair of horns for him. Can you not see Ahab turning to his new ally, and crying, 'Behold that emblem of victorious strength?' For all through the Bible horns speak of strength and victory. 'Mine horn is exalted in the Lord,' said Hannah (1 Sam. ii. 1). Daniel saw by the river a ram with two high horns (Dan. viii. 3). 'And in the midst of the throne stood a Lamb as it had been slain, and the Lamb had seven horns and seven eyes' (Rev. v. 6.).

BUT still Jehoshaphat was not satisfied. He detected the false ring in the four hundred. They were too fawning, too compliant, and smooth, to convey any assurance to his soul. Was there no other prophet of the Lord? 'Yes,' Ahab answered instantly; 'there was one.' His name was Micaiah (which means, 'Who is like Jehovah?'), and Ahab hated him because *he* would not truckle. Micaiah was brought (probably from prison)—were not his eyes dazzled with the kingly pomp? Ahab had arranged an imposing spectacle to overawe and confuse the hated prophet. But Micaiah was undaunted—who is like Jehovah? He warned King Ahab that he was going to his doom. No threats and no pleadings could turn him from the truth. He would speak nothing but what the Lord revealed. He is like Calchas, in the first book of the *Iliad*, when he speaks dauntlessly to Agamemnon. In spite of that warning, Ahab went out to fight; and, still more strange, Jehoshaphat went with him. And how King Ahab tried to disguise himself; and how he was slain by an arrow shot at random; and how, wounded, he lingered by the battle, until about sunset (still in his chariot) he died; all that is so full of tragic interest that it wants no comment to make it plain.

NOW note these simple lessons in the story. Firstly, *a flatterer is the worst of friends*. These prophets all professed to be the friends of Ahab; they would have

done anything (they said) to serve him ; yet time was to show that they were his worst enemies, and that the true friend was the outspoken Micaiah. It is often very hard to bear the truth ; but in the end we thank God that it was told us. Next note *the secret of being able to stand alone*. Micaiah's secret was the presence of God. The four hundred did not feel God's presence, and so they had to draw courage from one another. But the presence and power of the living God were so intensely real to Micaiah, that he had the splendid courage to be *himself*. And, lastly, *God sees through all disguises*. We cannot balk His plans by any mufti. Ahab thought that if he put off his robes, and fought as a common charioteer at Ramoth, somehow or other he would escape his doom. But the bowstring twanged, and the arrow was shot, and to the Syrian archer it was one of fifty. Yet the will of God was wrought by that random shaft. The disguise had proved a failure after all.

THIRTY-FIFTH SUNDAY

Evening

THE LORD'S SUPPER

Passage to be read : Matt. xxvi. 17-35.

WHAT first impresses us in the narrative of the Lord's Supper is *the perfect composure of the heart of Jesus*. There is no moment in our Lord's whole life when we realise so fully the meaning of His peace. It was the night on which He was betrayed. The shadows were deepening into the dark of Calvary. The last great agony of struggle was begun that was to close in crucifixion and the grave. Yet the heart of Jesus was supremely calm. We trace no fever and no

fret in it. The Lord is still 'at leisure from Himself,' and institutes this memorial for His own. Does not that teach us that nothing in heaven or earth can check the love of Jesus for His children? If He thought of them and planned for them that night, He will think of them and plan for them for ever. We sometimes wonder how Christ can remember us, in the midst of His vast transactions on the throne. The fear arises lest He may forget us, when men crucify the Son of God afresh (Hebrews vi. 6). But when we recall the night of the betrayal, such fears take to themselves wings and fly away. If ever a heart might reasonably have been self-centred, was it not then? Yet Jesus took and brake and gave to the disciples.

EQUALLY notable is *the quiet confidence of Jesus in the future*. Some of the disciples had already begun to wonder if the life of Jesus were more than a fine dream. Slowly, and after many a hint and lesson, they were beginning to grasp the approaching crucifixion, and there was not one of them at table that night but pictured crucifixion as defeat. Then in the city were the priests and scribes, triumphant at last and only waiting the signal. And if they were sure of anything it was of this, that the death of Jesus would mean the end of everything. There was not a soul in Jerusalem that evening that dreamed of a glorious future for our Lord. And it was *then* that Jesus instituted the supper. His name was to last as long as the sun endured. From age to age His memory would be cherished, and men would love Him and would serve Him and would die for Him through the long years until He came again. I cannot help feeling that this is more than human. I know of nothing parallel in history. Cicero was deeply concerned to think what men might say of him six hundred years after his death. Cromwell believed his *institutions* would last. Napoleon knew that the world would *wonder* at

him, but he knew perfectly that it would never *love* him. Christ only—Christ betrayed and crucified—saw the love and the worship of the centuries. Men were to show His death 'until He come.'

AGAIN we are arrested by *the great simplicity of this memorial*. There is no pomp and no elaborate ritual about it. It is a simple and humble and very homely deed. In the Old Testament things were very different. There we have striking and startling exhibitions. Altars were raised and the blood of beasts was shed, and there were a thousand significant details. But in the New Testament all that is done away. The sacrament is simplicity itself. And I do not think we should have difficulty in understanding the meaning of that change. When your father is trying to describe to you some family friend whom you have never met, he tells you everything he can about him, and he puts it in the brightest and the plainest words, until you feel you will know him when you meet. But when you *have* met, and the family friend is *your* friend, you have no need for that detailed description. The smallest token of his love to you, or even the pronouncing of his name, will bring him to your remembrance instantly. So in the Old Testament Christ was yet to come; no eye had yet seen Him in the flesh. But in the New Testament men have seen and known Him, and the simplest thing will serve as a memorial.

AGAIN, I think it was *a very Christ-like thing to see His Body and His Blood in bread and wine*. It speaks of the royal hopefulness of Jesus that He found such meanings in a piece of bread. On Oliver Goldsmith's monument these words are written: *Nihil tetigit quod non ornavit*—He touched nothing that he did not adorn. That may have been true of Goldsmith; but in nobler senses it was true of Jesus. When He went to Cana He

found water there; but the water was wine before the feast was ended. Now He takes the wine upon the table, and exalts it into the symbol of His blood. From water to wine and then from wine to blood—you see the upward trend in Jesus' action? No wonder the world began to bud and blossom under a gaze that understood things so. If a mustard-seed is the Kingdom in disguise, what may not the poorest boy or girl become? If broken bread speak of His sinless body, there is still a chance for broken characters. It is quite true that we are saved by hope. The hopefulnes of Jesus Christ is wonderful. It is that which makes Him the ideal Comrade for the brave young hearts that still are dreaming dreams.

THEN lastly, note that this feast speaks of His *death*. It was His death that Jesus chose for special remembrance. He might have chosen His birth (perhaps we think), or else His baptism. He might have bidden us commemorate some miracle. But instead of that He chose His death on Calvary. 'Ye do show the Lord's *death* until He come.' Now if there is one scene that sensitive hearts would shrink from, it is the awful scene of crucifixion. We never could have endured to look on Calvary, and yet it is Calvary that we commemorate. Is not that strange? A story I heard the other Sunday will explain it. There was a lady who was very beautiful—all excepting her hands, which were misshapen and marred. And for many a long day her little daughter had wondered what was the meaning of these repulsive hands. At last she said to her: 'Mother, I love your face, and I love your eyes and your hair, they are so beautiful. But I cannot love your hands, they are so ugly.' And then the mother told her about her hands: how ten years ago the house had taken fire, and how the nursery upstairs was in a blaze, and how she had rushed to the cradle and snatched the baby from it, and how her

hands from that hour had been destroyed. And the baby saved was her little listening daughter. And then the daughter kissed the shapeless hands (that she used to shrink from, before she knew their story), and she said: 'Mother, I love your face and your eyes and your hair; *but I love your hands now best of all.*'

THIRTY-SIXTH SUNDAY

Morning

THE FIERY CHARIOT

Passage to be read : 2 Kings ii. 1-18.

IT has not been uncommon for men whose death was drawing near to have some strange presentiment of the great change, and it seems to have been borne in upon Elijah that the time of his departure was at hand. When a man lives in communion with God, as Elijah did, the soul becomes very sensitive to heavenly messages. At the time of the great earthquakes in Japan, a scientist in the Isle of Wight was watching, in his observatory, the delicate instruments that record earth-tremors. He became conscious of the earthquakes within a minute of the time of their occurrence, though the breadth of the world lay between the earthquakes and his instruments. Now the soul is far more delicate than any instrument. It is far subtler than the finest mechanism. Who can doubt, then, that if it be watched and cleansed, it will detect the whisperings of heaven? Christ knew (as a man) that the Cross was near at hand. Paul felt that his course was almost run, and that very soon the crown of glory would be his. And it was borne in upon Elijah that his warfare was accomplished, and that his race was almost at the goal.

BUT before the end there was one work to do. There were others to think of before he left the world. There were guilds of the prophets at Gilgal, at Bethel,

at Jericho, and the man of God must strengthen and stablish these. When Paul was in prison he did not forget his churches. He wrote them those letters that have blessed the world. When Jesus was in the last stages of His journey He lavished His thought and His love upon His own. So Elijah, with the shadow of death on him, like a true hero, thought only the more of others; he must encourage and cheer his brethren of the schools. It is only the greatest who, under a great shadow, keep the unselfish and considerate heart. In the hour when mortality is pressing sorest it takes a saint or a hero to be kind. Elijah, like Paul, was both a saint and hero. The burden of the prophets was on his heart. He set out from Gilgal and paid a visit to Bethel. He set out from Bethel and paid a visit to Jericho. It was the last day of his life on earth, and he spent it in the quiet doing of his work. Is not that the true spirit of a child of God? Should we not all like to be found as Elijah was? A hundred years ago or more there was a total eclipse of the sun, visible in Connecticut. Candles were lighted; the birds went off to bed; the people thought the day of judgment was at hand. It happened that at the time the Legislature was sitting at Hartford. The House of Representatives adjourned; the Council proposed to follow their example. Colonel Davenport objected. 'The day of judgment,' he said, 'is either approaching or it is not. If it is not, there is no cause for an adjournment; if it is, I choose to be found doing my duty. I move, therefore, that candles be brought.'

NOW in Elijah's company Elisha was travelling. He, too, was haunted by the sense of coming loss. Had Elijah been ill, he would never have left his bedside, but Elijah was strong, and he must follow him. Now I do not think Elijah *wanted* to be alone. He was not like Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, saying to his three disciples, 'Tarry ye here.' But if God should appear

to him in awful splendour, and manifest His glory overwhelmingly, who knew but Elisha might be crushed by it?—who knew but his reason might totter on its throne? So in tenderness and pity towards Elisha, Elijah asked him to wait behind, and Elisha refused. And he asked him a second time, and then a third time; but no entreaty would keep Elisha back. And then Elijah saw it was of the Lord, and the two prophets went down to the Jordan together. How different was the conduct of Elisha from that of the disciples on the eve of Calvary! They had a far greater than Elijah to be true to, and yet we read that they all forsook Him and fled. It was a very loving and very gallant thing to hold fast by Elijah till the end. May we all be able to do that with Jesus! Mr. Froude, in his splendid tales of the seamen of Elizabeth's time, speaks again and again of their devotion to their leaders. The sailors (often badly fed, and not paid at all) followed Hawkins or Drake into incredible perils; they trusted and adored their captains so. No doubt Elisha had a heart like that to Elijah. Would we all had it towards our great Captain! Even Sir Francis Drake was sometimes beaten. But there is One to whom eternal victory is pledged.

SO the two prophets came to the Jordan, which gave them a path when Elijah's mantle touched it. And Elisha, being bidden to ask a boon, craves a double portion of Elijah's spirit (v. 9). He does not ask twice as much power as Elijah had. That would have been a dishonouring request. But he asks that he might be like Elijah's first-born, and get the two parts of the inheritance that fell, by the law of Moses, to the first-born son (Deut. xxi. 17). Then a strange appearance swept between the prophets. The chariots of God, which are twenty thousand, seemed to Elisha to surround Elijah. There was a glorious brightness as if the angels were there, who do God's bidding as a flame of fire. And not

in quiet peacefulness like Enoch, but in the whirlwind and the flame of his career, Elijah passed, without death, into the rest of God. Elisha felt like an orphaned child. He rent his clothes. But see! here was Elijah's mantle! Had his prayer been granted for that double portion? The parted waters of Jordan answered that (v. 14). The passage closes with the search for Elijah, lest the Lord should have cast him upon some mountain (v. 16); and it *is* on a mountain that we next see Elijah, with Moses and our transfigured Saviour.

NOW let us note three minor lessons, and first *the true safeguard of a nation* (v. 12). 'My father, my father,' cried Elisha, 'the chariot of Israel and the horsemen thereof.' He meant that the strength of Israel was not in its chariotry, but in the character and prayer of heroes like Elijah. When the Armada was sent out against England, Spain thought that its mighty galleons were invincible. But the Lord Admiral was a heartless ignoramus, and failure was stamped on the expedition from the first. Great men, inspired by God, and true to Him, are the real defence of a nation in distress. It is noble and consecrated spirits like Elijah who are the chariot and horsemen of Israel. Then mark *the new use for the old mantle*. It was at the touch of the mantle that the Jordan parted. That shaggy mantle awoke many memories. It was a kind of epitome of Elijah's past. How many hours of wrestling it had witnessed! How many mercies and miracles it had seen! It was the badge of the prophetic calling; it spoke to Elijah of a God who had never failed him. And he uses it *now*, as in the happy confidence that the Lord, who had been mindful of him, would bless him still. Is not that a new use for old clothes? Even an old jacket may help me forward. *We* give our old mantles to our *church's* mission; but Elijah's mantle spoke to him of his own. Then, lastly, will you note *the sight which love gives?*

The only eye that saw the ascension of Elijah was Elisha's. Was it not because he loved him and was so loyal? The first to see the risen Christ was Mary Magdalen, and do we not read of Mary that she loved much? Love is not blind, as the old saying would have it. True love has the keenest of all sight. It is the condition of all revelation. It is the highway to knowing and to seeing God.

THIRTY-SIXTH SUNDAY

Evening

JESUS BEFORE CAIAPHAS

Passage to be read : Matt. xxvi. 57-75.

OUR Saviour had to undergo two trials, the one before the high-priest, and the other before the Roman governor, and it is with the former of these two that our passage deals. Had Palestine been an independent state, the tribunal of Caiaphas would have given the verdict. There would have been no appeal for any prisoner from the decision of the college of the Sanhedrim. But Palestine had lost its independence. It was part of the great Roman province of Syria. Hence the last word, in cases of high moment, lay not with the Jew, but with the Roman. Now the Romans did not strain their own authority. They left a large measure of power with the provincials. Especially where matters of religion were concerned, they gave the conquered nations a free hand. But when the question was one of life and death, they took the final judgment to themselves, and that explains the double trial of Jesus. He is first brought before the Jewish council, and by it he is held guilty of death. He is then brought before the

Roman governor, and next Sunday we shall find what happened there.

CAIAPHAS, then, was high-priest at the time, and Jesus should have been led straight to him. But it was past midnight now, and some of the members of the court would be abed—could not something be done with Jesus till all was ready? John tells us that Jesus was taken before Annas. This Annas had himself been the high-priest, and just as we sometimes call a man provost, or bailie, though it is a year or two since he held office, so Annas, a man of most commanding influence, was still called, in Jerusalem, the high-priest. He parleyed with Jesus, in an informal way, while the senators came hurrying into the council-hall. And then, while all the city was asleep, and the children were dreaming of play and love and heaven, the Friend of the children was put upon His trial. It was an illegal council, to begin with. The Sanhedrim was forbidden to meet by night. But if they waited until the city was astir, and the whisper ran along the streets that Christ was prisoner, might there not be a popular rising in His favour? They loved the darkness because their deeds were evil. Like Judas, they had a kinship with the night. It were well that the Roman soldiers should have Jesus, when the day lightened and the city awoke.

THEN the trial began with the summoning of witnesses, and for a time it looked as if the prosecution must break down. Things had been rushed with such a nervous hurry that even the witnesses had not been drilled. There was no lack of witnesses, it seems (v. 60). I wish we could always count on witnesses *for* Christ, as surely as they reckoned on witnesses *against* Him then. But though these witnesses had much to say, and repeated many a biting word of Jesus on His judges, the judges knew their own character too well, and knew what

the people thought of them too well, to dream that Jesus could be condemned for that. There was a vaunt about the Temple, certainly, but you could not get Rome (that rude destroyer of temples) to sanction a Galilean's death for *that*. Caiaphas was baffled. The steady composure of Christ was like an insult. Every one else was feverish, Jesus alone was calm. And it was then, as in half-frantic desperation, that Caiaphas put his question to the Lord. He conjured Him to tell if He were Messiah. Jesus answered immediately that He was, and 'hereafter shall ye see the Son of Man sitting on the right hand of power, and coming in the clouds of heaven.' Jesus was very courageous in His silence; but He was also very courageous in His speech. That sentence practically sealed His fate, yet the hour had come for speech, and Jesus spoke. They called it blasphemy. He was guilty of death (Lev. xxiv. 15). They had triumphed, and self-control went to the winds. Their pent-up passions burst out like a torrent. They spat on Him, and they smote Him—how they loathed Him! And out in the court the Apostle John was sitting, watching it all in unutterable agony. Would not this hour come back to him again, when, long years afterwards, in the isle of Patmos, he wrote of 'the Kingdom and *patience* of Jesus Christ'?

MEANTIME Peter had come upon the scene. Impelled partly by curiosity, it may be, and largely by his devotion to his Lord, he had followed afar off to the high-priest's palace. Like other men who follow afar off, he was running into terrible temptation. Unbefriended and unknown, Peter might have been denied admission to the high-priest's house. But John was there already, and John was a man of some little social standing, and it was at John's entreaty that Peter got in. There are times when we think we are doing our friend a kindness, and we are only making life the harder for him. Now, when we read about the high-priest's palace, we are not to

think of such a palace as Holyrood. It was a large house built round a square courtyard, and with the windows opening inward on the court. It was in this courtyard, then, that Peter was sitting, chafing his cold hands at the fire, when one of the maidservants charged him with discipleship. And Peter was so utterly taken aback, that quick as lightning, he denied the charge. And then it dawned on him what he had done, and he rose up, and went to the dark gateway. He would stand in its deep shadows for a little, if only to feel the ground beneath his feet. But the lamp in the gateway swung and flared, and every now and then it lit up the face of Peter; and another maid recognised him there, and Peter once again denied his Lord. The first sin made the second easier. Meanwhile the news was spreading in the courtyard. There would be sport in baiting the disciple. It would put some warmth into their hearts on that cold morning to worry this bewildered Galilean. Poor Peter! it was too late to keep silence now, and to open his mouth was to be betrayed by his Highland accent. Peter denied again. 'And immediately the cock crew.' With a breaking and a penitent heart Peter went out. When Judas went out, it was darkening to midnight. But when Peter went out it was very near the dawn.

THIRTY-SEVENTH SUNDAY

Morning

THE JEWS' RETURN FROM EXILE

Passage to be read : Ezra i. 1-11.

NO king more impressed himself on the imagination of the East than Cyrus, with whose name our chapter opens. Strange legends had gathered round his childhood; even in his boyish sports (when he was thought to be a herdsman's son) there was the flashing out of a true kingly spirit; and in all his brilliant and victorious career there is a blending of military genius, and true devotion, and tolerance, and large-hearted wisdom, that marks out Cyrus as one of the world's greatest men. Our lesson opens with one of his famous hours. It was the hour of his conquest of Babylonia. It was then for the first time that he became a power in the life and fortunes of the exiled Jews. Many a time they had heard of him before; there was never an evening, when they met by the waters of Babylon, but the name of Cyrus would come into their talk. But now the distant and much-rumoured conqueror was actually marching on their city, and you can imagine how that would thrill them all. First came his general, leading in the army. Then followed, in royal state, Cyrus himself. And amid the crowds that lined the conqueror's march, there was many an eager and expectant Jew. Was this the man of whom their prophets had spoken? Was this the Cyrus who was to be God's

servant? Was the day dawning of which they had so often heard, when their long exile would be over? There was little sleep in many a Jewish home on the night when Cyrus entered Babylon.

NOW Cyrus would not be long in Babylon before he would come into touch with Daniel. And Daniel had a strange power of impressing kings, like (and yet unlike) the power of John Knox. It may have been, then, through the agency of Daniel, that God wrought upon the spirit of Cyrus. It may have been that Cyrus was powerfully impressed with such words as we now read in Isaiah (Isa. xlv. 28). But whatever the secondary and immediate cause, Cyrus sent out a proclamation through his kingdom. It gave the Jews liberty to return, and to build again the Temple at Jerusalem. Whether Cyrus (as the words might lead us to infer) invoked the name of Jehovah in his edict, or whether it ran in the name of the god Merodach, and had been misinterpreted in translation, is a question that has been much discussed. However it be, God was at work in it; it was the fulfilment of His promised word; the hour had come that He was pledged to bring. Nor was the return to be accomplished meanly. When God fulfils, He fulfils in royal fashion. Liberal gifts were given to the exiles. The vessels of the Temple were restored. And our chapter closes with enumerating these vessels, some of them of gold, and some of them of silver, which Zerubbabel (here called Sheshbazzar) brought up from Babylon unto Jerusalem.

THE first lesson we should learn from this chapter is *that divine delays do not imply forgetfulness*. Seventy years had passed away since the Jews had been carried off into captivity. The old men had died in Babylonia; the children of the year of exile were grey-haired. There

were men and women in the prime of life to whom Jerusalem and the Temple were but names. Some of them doubtless had forgotten God, and many thought that God had forgotten them. But God had not forgotten, though He delayed. With Him a thousand years are as one day. When the fulness of time came, and purposes were ripe, the long-promised deliverance did not fail. Can we remember other divine delays? There are many notable instances in Scripture. When our Saviour heard that Lazarus was sick, He delayed His coming to Bethany for two days. We must never seek to enforce our times on God. We must learn to wait for Him, no less than to work for Him. Sometimes He anticipates our desires, and fills our cup the moment we hold it out. But other times, to school us into patience, He comes long after the season of our hope.

THE next lesson that is written here is *that divine encouragement is given for difficult duty*. We are not to think of all these exiled Israelites as hungering for Jerusalem again. Except in some of the purer and nobler souls, the longing to return had died away. The word of the prophet quickened them at times, and providences touched the chords of memory, but for long periods the exiles forgot home; they were busy, and tolerably happy and contented. Then came the summons of Cyrus to return. The hour of restoration had arrived. Perhaps they never fully realised till then how comfortable their lot had been in Babylon. What! were they to leave this haven of rest for the hard journey to a ruined church? I should not have wondered had they refused to go. It is then that we read how God raised up their spirits (v. 5). Divine encouragement was given for duty. They were stirred, they knew not how, with holy discontent; the smouldering passion for their land revived. Obstacles, that might have seemed insuperable, were broken down in the tide of their enthusi-

asm, and the Bible tells us it was all of God. Now I want my readers to remember that. We are so apt to forget God in glowing hours. When hope and enthusiasm are strong within us, it is not then that we are readiest to see God. But God is more than the succour of our dark days; He is the source of all the sunshine of our bright ones. He is not alone the bearer of our burdens; He is the secret of our more glorious hours. It is a great thing to think of God when we are sick. But it is greater, when our spirits are exuberant, to know that our spirit hath been raised by God.

AND the last lesson I wish you to remark is *that divine fulfilment exceeds our expectation*. When any of the exiles dreamed of their return, they pictured it as a very sorry pilgrimage. If they got free with their wives and children, and had to leave all their belongings behind them, it was the most that they could reasonably expect. But instead of that, on the day of their departure, the neighbours flocked into the Jewish homes; and gold and silver and goods and horses and cattle were gifted in great plenty to the emigrants (v. 4). And then the Temple vessels? They thought them lost for ever. But here was a vast array of them in convoy. I am certain that often on their homeward journey they would tell how God had exceeded all their hopes. Do you not think that Jacob felt that, too, when he got Joseph back in stately dignity? The most he ever could expect was to have him creeping to the tent to die. And do you not think the prodigal felt that, when he got the ring and the shoes and the best coat in the wardrobe? He would have been happy by the kitchen fire. God is a king, and when He gives, gives royally. When He fulfils, He exceeds our expectation. He is always able, and He is always waiting, to do far above what we can ask or think.

THIRTY-SEVENTH SUNDAY

Evening

JESUS BEFORE PILATE

Passage to be read : Matt. xxvii. 1-28.

BY the Jewish law no sentence of death could be passed by night, and therefore, when the morning dawned (v. 1), a second meeting of the priests and elders was convened. It was then that their formal sentence of death was passed on Jesus, and it was then that they deliberated how they should best present their case to Pilate, so as to ensure that Jesus would not escape. We know very little about Pilate, save from the Gospel story. He was a typical Roman, self-centred and self-seeking, not devoid of the Roman love of justice. But his love of self outweighed his love of justice; and his shameful past had so eaten the heart out of him, that in the great crisis of his life he went to ruin. He was the last man in the world to manage Jews. He had outraged their feelings in the most wanton manner. We do not wonder to read in an old historian that Pilate fell into disgrace in after years, and, wearied with misfortunes, killed himself. Those who have read Scott's story, *Anne of Geierstein*, will know the legend of Mount Pilatus—the mountain with the bare and jagged peaks, opposite the Rigi, at the west end of the Lake of Lucerne. The legend is that Pilate spent years of torturing remorse on that mountain, and at last drowned himself in the lake; and 'a form,' says Scott, 'is often seen to emerge from the water, and to go through the form of one washing his hands.'

NOW the usual residence of the Roman procurator was not Jerusalem. Jerusalem was an intolerable city to the man who had revelled in the gay life of Rome. The usual residence was Cæsarea, a mimic Rome down by the seashore. But whenever Jerusalem was thronged with strangers, as it was on the occasion of all the great feasts, it was the duty of the Roman governor to be there in person, to see that the peace was kept. So Pilate was in Jerusalem at the Passover, and he was living in the magnificent palace of the Herods, when the hour came that flashed on him a light that was to make him visible to all the ages. In the early morning Jesus was brought to Pilate, not *into* the palace (for to enter *that* would have been pollution to a Jew), but into the court, with its colonnade, in front of the palace. And the first question which Pilate asked showed how cunningly the charge against Jesus had been coloured. Pilate did *not* ask, 'Art Thou the Messiah?'—what did he care for Jewish superstitions? But he *did* ask, '*Art Thou the King of the Jews?*' (v. 11). The question indicates how craftily the priests had gone to work. They had given a political and civil turn to the spiritual claims of Jesus, in order to play on the Roman governor's heart. They had hinted that here was a rival to Tiberius, and Pilate would do well to silence him. Jesus did not deny the accusation. There was a glorious sense in which He was a King. And when the accusers began to heap charge on charge, and Jesus neither retorted nor retaliated, I think that Pilate began to feel His kingliness. He marvelled greatly (v. 14). He had never met a Jew at all like this. There was something subduing in this silent Man. Pilate resolved to do all he safely could to get this strange, sad prisoner acquitted.

A POWERFUL influence now appeared to back his efforts—it was the unlooked-for intervention of Pilate's wife. Do you wonder how *she* had heard of

Jesus? Well, perhaps in the idle days at Cæsarea the tale of His deeds had enlivened the dinner-table. Or perhaps that morning, when Jesus was gone to Herod, Pilate had told his wife about the Man. And then, for it was still early, Pilate's wife had fallen asleep again, and God had visited her in a dream. Did God reveal the glory of Christ to her, so that she became a disciple of the Lord? Every Christian in Russia believes that, and the Eastern Church has made a saint of her. At least, while she slept, God touched her conscience, and she saw the unutterable horror of the deed in hand. She wakened in terror—could nothing be done yet? She despatched a messenger to warn her husband. She bade him have nothing to do with that just Man. And again Pilate resolved to do all in his power to get this haunting prisoner acquitted.

NOW Pilate had formed the shrewd suspicion that jealousy was at the back of the indictment (v. 18). Who knew but that the prisoner might be a popular hero—had not the provincial crowds been crying Hosanna to Him? It flashed on Pilate (always thinking of self) that there was one way of releasing Jesus that might rebuild his own shattered popularity. It was a Roman custom at the Passover to liberate one prisoner chosen by the people. And it came as an inspiration to Pilate that if he summoned the people they might ask for Jesus. He summoned the people and laid two names before them—the one that of Jesus, the other of Barabbas. And we have a hint that Barabbas—which means 'son of the father'—had another name, and it was Jesus too! Now we never can tell how the mob would have chosen had they been left alone to make their choice, for the Pharisees were busy in the crowd; they whispered that Jesus was favoured by that odious Pilate. And they so played on these poor city-hearts, and so touched the chords of their cherished prides and hates, that there grew and gathered

a hoarse shout, 'Barabbas'; and Jesus?—'Let Him be crucified.' There was no gainsaying a hoarse mob like that. The more they were checked, the wilder grew the clamour. It was infinitely disgusting for a patrician Roman to have any discussion with such shouting beasts. He called for water, and standing on the balcony where all could see him, he washed his hands. It was an act that every Jew would understand. A silence fell on the flushed and eager crowd. What was that they heard from the balcony — Pilate protesting his innocence? Another terrible cry rang out in an instant, 'His blood be upon us and on our children.' Then Pilate released Barabbas unto them, and when he had scourged Jesus, delivered Him—to be crucified (v. 26).

THIRTY-EIGHTH SUNDAY

Morning

REBUILDING THE TEMPLE

Passage to be read : Ezra iii. 1-13.

LEAVING Babylon some time in the spring, when the fresh life in garden and in meadow would be like an outward sign of the fresh hopes of Israel, the great company of the Jews made their way homeward. They would spend a month or two upon the journey, and many a shepherd sitting on the hillside would wonder what strange and unwarlike host this was that was winding serpent-like through the valley below. Every now and then a burst of song would reach him, for there were two hundred singing men and singing women in the company (ii. 65); and when the children were weary and the women were faint, and even the men, footsore and parched, were thinking wistfully of the fountains and groves of Babylon, some rousing melody (of the kind we are still singing in the Psalms) would cheer and stimulate the weakest of them far more effectually than any 'Marseillaise.' At last they descried the hills of their dear country, they were home again; the exile was concluded. And the great host, with many tender farewells, and much of the sweet sorrow of parting that Shakespeare talks of, scattered itself to north, south, east, and west, among the towns and villages of their land. Now it is remarkable that they had hardly settled down, when the call of religion brought them together again. If the exile had done

nothing else for them, it had taught them to seek first the kingdom of God. There was a vast deal of work to do at home. There were houses to build and there were fields to plough; there were vineyards to dress and businesses to start. Yet in the seventh month the people left all that, to gather in Jerusalem for worship (iii. 1). An altar was built on the spot where the old one stood. The daily sacrifices smoked again. It is wonderful how dear the altar grows, when a man has been long forbidden it in Babylon.

MEANTIME, though the altar was precious, there was something grander than the altar in their view. There could be no security, and indeed no peace of conscience, for the people whom God had so signally delivered, until the ruined Temple was restored. So preparations were begun at once. Masons and carpenters got their retaining fee (v. 7). Messengers were sent out to Tyre and Sidon, for the most skilful workmen are not always saints. And once again the stately forests of Lebanon, long undisturbed save by the storm and thunder, resounded with the clang of Tyrian axes. When folk are in earnest, work progresses rapidly. These preparations only took half a year. There is nothing in the world like high enthusiasm for helping us through great tasks in little time. So when the ceremonies of the Passover were completed, and when in the second month the weather was propitious, the foundation stone of the Temple was laid. It was a great and ever-memorable scene. There stood the priests in full pontifical dress, and each with a trumpet in his hand. Behind them were the Levites with their cymbals. All round in an enclosing circle was a dense crowd of eager and grateful people. And when the priests lifted up their voice in song, which was caught up and answered in chorus by the Levites, and when, ere the last notes had died away, the trumpets sounded and the cymbals

clashed, then all the people shouted with a great shout, and praised the Lord because the foundation was laid. Were there no tears in such a stirring hour? When hearts were moved, and memories arose, and all the glorious and sad and sinful past revived—were there none in their mingled joy and sorrow who found it impossible to shout, for weeping? ‘Many of the ancient men who had seen the first house, wept with a loud voice’ (v. 12).

NOW let us gather some lessons from this chapter. And first, *it is well to build an altar till we can get a temple.* There would have been large excuse for these returned exiles if they had stayed in their homes till the foundation-laying. It was a *Temple* they were bound to erect, and till that was possible, had they not work at their own doors? But the spirit of Israel was far nobler than that. Their sufferings had purified and deepened them. They said, ‘Until the way is clear to have a temple, at least let us have an altar to the Lord.’ And I believe that that lonely and isolated altar, rising amid a wilderness of ruin, was as precious in the sight of God in heaven, as the House that was soon to bear His name. When you cannot do all that you would like to do, at least do the little that is possible now. It is one great danger of having splendid dreams, that they make us blind to present opportunities.

‘When obstacles and trials seem
Like prison walls to be,
I do the little I can do,
And leave the rest to Thee.’

Erect your altar till you can build your temple.

NEXT note, *you may look for excitement when great foundations are laid.* As we read this story of the founding of the Temple, we see what a scene of enthu-

siasm it was. There was a great excitement in the crowd, an excitement that would have been wild had it not been filled with God. When the actual building of the walls began, there would be little of this loud enthusiasm. Men would toil silently, in sweat and weariness, as stone after stone was lifted to its place. Now there are two ways, akin yet different, in which we may picture the beginnings of religion. We may think of it as the *sowing of a seed*; or we may think of it as the *founding of a temple*. If the *first* (and the seed is the Word), then the beginnings will be quiet and noiseless. There is no re-echoing cheer along the fields, when the sower goes out to sow in the spring morning. And a man might listen with keenest ears, and never hear the seed fall on the furrow. Did your religious life begin like that? But if the *second*, and it too is scriptural, for 'are ye not temples of the Holy Ghost?' you may expect a little excitement at the start. Let no mother or no teacher damp it down. Zerubbabel was wise to let the people shout. He knew that the days of weary strain were coming, when they would be sad and sorrowful enough. So the enthusiasm of true foundation-days will change into the toil of building-days. By and by, when the first glow is over, it will

'condense within the soul,
And change to purpose strong.'

A Christian is not going to be built up into a cottage. He is going to be built up into a glorious temple. I think it is wise to keep that in mind should there be some tumult on the foundation-day.

THEN, lastly, we see this in our chapter, *how closely akin is our laughter to our tears*. Has no one ever said to you in a great hour, 'I did not know whether to laugh or cry'? I think that was the feeling of the ancients as they gathered on that memorable morning.

They were very happy, yet they were very sad. They meant to praise, yet they could only weep. They were learning, what we all learn in the long-run, that there is mystical union between our smiles and tears. It was Jesus who wept, yet talked about 'My joy.' The Gospel centres in a Man of sorrows, yet the great call of the Gospel is 'Rejoice.' There are some things that seem to stand far separate, yet after all they are very closely akin.

THIRTY-EIGHTH SUNDAY

Evening

THE RESURRECTION

Passage to be read: John xx. 1-18.

ALTHOUGH Jesus had been teaching His disciples, with increasing clearness, that He would rise from the dead, none of them had grasped the full meaning of His words. The company of Jesus had been so sweet to them that they had refused to let their minds dwell upon His death; and the hints of death and of His resurrection were so vitally connected in the teaching of Jesus, that to ignore the one fact was to reject the other. When Jesus told Martha that her brother would rise again, Martha answered that she knew he would rise at the last day. So, doubtless, when Jesus spoke darkly of His own resurrection, the disciples would dream of some far-distant hour. Long ages after Elijah had been carried heavenward, some of them had seen him on the Mount of Transfiguration. So it might be that when the centuries had run, they would meet in glory the Lord they loved so well. They could believe for some far-distant day. Their point of failure was not the future but the present. The day would come, no doubt, when Christ

would rise. The incredible thing was that He was risen *now*. Are we not all tempted to an unbelief like that? Is it not easy to believe that God *will* work, but very hard to believe that God *is* working? Strong faith not only deals with the far past, and with the years that are still hidden behind the veil. Strong faith is radiant for the present hour, and sees the hand of God at work to-day.

EARLY in the morning, then, of the first day of the week, Mary of Magdala steals out into the garden. She had been there before when they were burying Jesus, and she had marked the spot where they had laid her Lord. Now it was dark; the sun had not yet risen; the children in Jerusalem were dreaming happy dreams. But the Sabbath had been one of misery for Mary, and little sleep had visited her that night. And what was it that drew her to the garden? It was not curiosity; it was love. It was love with a passion for service at the heart of it—there was still something she could do for Jesus. Joseph and Nicodemus had embalmed the body. But it had been hastily done, for the Sabbath was at hand. Mary was going to complete the embalming, and she would have the quiet hour of dawn for her sad task. But who would help her to roll away the stone? That thought had been troubling her all the weary night. Her heart was full of it as she lifted the latch of her lodging, and stepped out into the chill morning air. As she entered the garden, the sky was reddening. The dawn was flushing up out of the East. And she looked and saw at a glance that something strange had happened—the stone, that she had been vexing herself about all night, was gone! Now often, when one trouble is removed, there comes a greater trouble in its place. We looked for peace when the thing that vexed us vanished, and instead of peace we were plunged in deeper sorrow. So Mary, instead of rejoicing at what

she saw, was launched out upon a wider sea of agony. It flashed on her in a twinkling that the body was stolen. Under cover of night her Lord had been taken away. She dropped the spices and ointments she was carrying. There were other women there; Mary forgot them. She hurried back through the streets of the wakening city. Breathlessly she told Peter and John what she had seen. And then we read how Peter and John ran out, and how Peter impetuously pushed on into the tomb. And there were the grave-clothes lying on the stone slab; and on the stone pillow, raised a little above them, the napkin, still coiled in a circle as when it bound His head. The linen clothes, weighted with spices, had sunk flat; but the empty napkin kept the form of the Saviour's brow.

THEN follows the appearance of the risen Lord to Mary. It was not to Peter that Jesus first appeared. It was not even to John, 'whom Jesus loved.' It was to Mary, out of whose heart Jesus had cast seven devils; it was to Mary, who loved much because much had been forgiven her. After discovering that the grave was empty, the disciples had gone away home again (v. 10). But Mary, whose home had been the heart of Jesus, could not tear herself away from the garden and the grave. It was desolation to think that Christ was lost. Not even the white-robed angels could console her. We are never so sure of the depth of Mary's love as when we see her weeping by the tomb. A great scholar, in treating of the resurrection, points out the different features emphasised in the accounts of the four evangelists. Matthew dwells chiefly on the *majesty and glory* of the resurrection. Mark insists upon it as a *fact*. Luke treats it as a *spiritual necessity*; and John, as a *touchstone of character*. And when we see Mary weeping in the garden, overwhelmed with her unutterable loss, we feel that here is the touchstone of *her* character. In the

depth of her loss we find the depth of her love, and she loved much because she was forgiven much. So Mary stood in her sorrow beside the grave, thinking perhaps that Jesus was far away ; and Jesus was never nearer to her than in that moment when she thought Him lost. She turned round ; there was some one behind her. It was Jesus, but she thought it was the gardener. Some mysterious change had come on the Lord she loved, and it was dawn, and her eyes were dim with tears. Then Jesus said, 'Mary,' and she knew the voice. What a glorious joy must have taken her poor heart ! She cried, 'Rabboni !' She would have clung to Him. She would have held Him in the old grasp of human tenderness. And Jesus has to say to her, 'Cling not to Me ; hereafter, Mary, you shall walk by faith and not by sight.' Then Mary received Christ's message for the disciples ; and with a new heart, and in a world that was all new, hastened to tell them that she had seen the Lord.

THIRTY-NINTH SUNDAY

Morning

THE TEMPLE COMPLETED

Passages to be read : Ezra iv. 1-6, 11-24 ; vi. 13-22.

WHEN the building of the Temple had advanced a certain stage, there came a very unexpected offer of help. Deputies arrived from Samaria professing willingness to assist in the great work. Now the people of Samaria were very strangely mingled ; they were largely composed of colonists from the East. Had they been allowed to share in the Temple-work, they would have brought with them many forbidden superstitions. Their offer of help was immediately refused. To have such co-workers would be disloyalty to God. And nothing better shows the insincerity of those who seemed so eager to co-operate than their action when their service was rejected. They began to plot for the hindrance of the building. They hired agents at the Persian Court, who should lose no opportunity of interfering. They bent every effort to frustrate the work that was slowly but surely proceeding at Jerusalem. We have mention of a letter they sent to Ahasuerus, though what reception it met with we do not know. But a second letter to Artaxerxes (which is given in full) had a more decisive and disastrous issue. The writers pretended to be in great alarm ; Jerusalem was being fortified again. If the work was allowed to proceed uninterrupted, then farewell to Persian dominion in the West. It is hardly to be wondered at that Artaxerxes took fright, and ordered the

instant stopping of the building. So the work ceased, we read, until the second year of Darius, King of Persia.

IT was then that the encouragement of the prophets was so powerful. Haggai and Zechariah, men inspired of God, were raised up to cheer and rouse the people. The student should read the books of these two prophets if he would have the whole scene live before him. We learn from these books (what is not indicated here) that a general apathy had overspread the people. The first enthusiasm had passed away, and the forced cessation had bred a great discouragement. But every morning, in the streets of Jerusalem, some word from God was uttered by a prophet, until at last, though the Persian decree still stood, and though the building of the sacred walls was still forbidden, the princes and leaders could not be restrained from setting their hands to the great work again. Word was speedily brought to Babylon of what was happening; it seemed as if the work would have to cease again. But a counter-appeal was despatched to Darius by the builders, and God so ordered things that it was not in vain. A copy of the original decree of Cyrus was discovered, in which the Jews were charged to rebuild their Temple, and Darius learning, probably for the first time, that the work had the sanction of his great predecessor, sent word to Samaria that none must hinder, but, on the contrary, must forward it. So after long delay, and deep anxiety, the Temple was at last restored; and our theme closes with the sacrifice and holy-day that marked the dedication of God's House.

NOTE first *how we are tested by refusals*. No doubt, if the Samaritans had been allowed to help, they would have revealed their true characters ere long. The dubious motives that had inspired them in their offer would have become patent as the work advanced. But if their acceptance would have tested them, their refusal

tested them more speedily and surely. It was not what was given them, it was what was denied them, that showed very clearly the kind of men they were. We are all tested and revealed in ways like that. The things we fail to get betray our character. It is not alone the prayers that have been answered, it is the prayers that have met with no response, that give deeper insight into our state of heart. The glory of Jesus never shone so brightly as when, having prayed 'if it be possible, let this cup pass from Me,' He went forward steadfastly, and never doubting, to drink that cup in all its bitterness.

NOTE next *the interruptions in the work*. I am sure it seemed to many of the Israelites as if the work would never be completed. Harassed by enemies, hampered by Persian edicts, was there any hope of the copestone being set? It is little wonder that the people lost heart, and thought the scheme but a 'fond imagination.' But spite of difficulties, and forced cessations, and all that the powers of the world could do, the work went forward till it was completed—and *ye* are the temples of the living God. There are times for us all when the great task seems hopeless. There come hours when we despair of being Christ-like. The temple rises but a little way, and then all effort seems to be in vain. In such times it is well to read these chapters. They are a parable of the difficulties of the Christian. They give new hope that, spite of every obstacle, the building will yet rise to its completion.

LASTLY, mark *how a word of encouragement may be real service*. Haggai and Zechariah were inspired of God, and the messages they delivered were from Him; but these messages were not merely predictions, they were strong and rousing words to heartless men, and we see very clearly, as we read this lesson, how powerful and helpful these encouragements were. The prophets may

have lent a hand at the building, as the prophets of our own Reformation sometimes unsheathed the sword ; but their greatest service was not that, it lay in the ringing words that cheered the others. Do not forget the ministry of encouragement. There is great virtue sometimes in a word of praise. There are mothers and wives and many weary toilers who would be twice happy in a little commendation. Flattery is always to be abhorred ; it hurts both giver and receiver ; but timely praise to all dispirited builders is part of the 'sure word of prophecy,' and it is a part we all practise far too seldom.

THIRTY-NINTH SUNDAY

Evening

THE DOUBTING OF THOMAS

Passage to be read : John xx. 19-31.

NO reader of the New Testament but has observed the supreme importance given to Christ's resurrection there. It underlies all arguments ; it inspires all pleadings. It is the mould in which the apostles' thought is cast ; it is the morning star that lights their feet. I do not know that we have kept the accent there. We are so fond of asking what would Jesus do, that we almost forget the most stupendous thing that Jesus did. It calls for a tingling sense that Christ has risen, to give us back again the apostolic music. In the Life of Dr. Dale of Birmingham there is no passage more arresting than the page where he tells how it flashed on him that Jesus lives. He had been ministering, preaching, praying, when suddenly, as in an inspiration, there broke on him the sense that Jesus was alive. We need to be touched like that. We need a

new faith that the stone was rolled away. We need a new baptism of the conviction of Thomas, when, clasping these risen feet, he cried, 'My Lord and my God.'

FIRST note, then, that *the character of Thomas gives tremendous weight to his conviction*. Do we not sometimes wonder at the Master's choice of disciples? Do we not feel that some of the twelve must have been very uncongenial company for Jesus? Why did He choose them, then? I can understand how a St. John would serve the world. But what service could a man of the character of Thomas render? I think the chief service of Thomas to the world was his magnificent witness to the resurrection. Peter was passionate, impulsive, rash, springing to his conclusions just as he sprang that morning on the waves: but when a great miracle is in the balance, I want the witness of another character than that. And John?—John loved so splendidly, that a loveless world has ruled him out of court. But the world cannot rule Thomas out of court; his character gives tremendous weight to his conviction. For Thomas *was a very stubborn man*. There was a grim tenacity about him, that almost made him *dour*. Some men have only to see a thing in print to credit it: they would believe anything on the joint testimony of ten friends. But the ten disciples came hurrying to Thomas; and Peter and James and John were crying 'We have seen the Lord,' and Thomas knew what truthful men they were, yet Thomas stubbornly refused to be convinced. There was something very *dour* in that—and it was wrong, as stubbornness generally is—but in the measurements of history it was superb. If that man is convinced, I am convinced. If the man who snaps his fingers at Peter and John comes round, I yield. And the next Sunday Thomas is on his face, crying 'My Lord, my God.' Then, too, Thomas was *a despondent man*; brave but despondent, a commoner combination than we think.

Do you remember how when Christ was summoned to the grave of Lazarus, it was such a hazardous thing for Him to venture near Jerusalem, that His disciples tried to dissuade Him from the journey? 'What, goest Thou thither again?' said one. 'Lord, if Lazarus sleep he shall do well,' parleyed another. But Thomas said, 'Let us also go, that we may die with him.' It was the word of a brave but a desponding man; a man who naturally saw the darker side—and we can thank God there was such a melancholy heart among the twelve. It is easy to persuade a merry heart. When I am full of hope, I shall credit the sunshine, though all the sky be cloud. But a melancholy man is hard to turn; and when a melancholy heart like Thomas's turns in an hour, passes from death to life, accepts the joyfullest fact in the world's history, and worships, I bow the head before the infinite wisdom that set such a man among the twelve.

SO the character of Thomas gives tremendous weight to his conviction. Now mark, in the second place, that *this conviction was reached by the dark road of doubt*. I wonder if we could classify this doubt of Thomas? Well, there are some who doubt because their *will is biased*. That doubt runs down to life and character, and is a dishonest, miserable thing. 'Ah, if I only believed what you believe,' said one to Pascal, 'I should very soon be a better man.' 'Begin by being a better man,' Pascal replied, 'and you will very soon believe what I believe.' There are those who will tell you they doubt this or that, and give you a score of reasons for their doubts; and at the bottom it is a moral question. There is some habit that would have to go; there is some doubtful practice that must cease; there is some little reputation that would vanish, and the cloak of doubt is used to dally with sin. But no man would charge Thomas with that; whatever he had, he had a clean heart. He was a despondent, but not a dishonest

doubter. Then there are others whose doubt is *intellectual*, and this is the prevalent doubting of to-day. But I do not think that is the doubt of Thomas. I cannot think that a man who had seen Lazarus's resurrection could be intellectually sceptical of the resurrection of Lazarus's Lord. His doubt sprang from another source than that. He doubted *because he felt so deeply*, and that perhaps is the sorest doubt of all. You post a score of letters in a week, and you never doubt about their safe arrival. One day, you post a precious manuscript, and instantly the possibilities of some mischance are awakened, and you cannot rest, you doubt its safety so. It is because you feel so strongly, that you doubt. And Thomas felt so strongly that he doubted too. For the rising of Jesus meant everything to him. His heart was agonised lest it were false. Perhaps there would be more of Thomas's doubt to-day, if there were more of Thomas's love.

LASTLY, *these doubts were dispelled by the gentleness of Christ.* Thomas set up one test. 'Comrades,' he said, 'I love you ; but it is all too wonderful, and I cannot believe you. But hark, when I see with these eyes the gashes of the nails, and put this hand into the wound which the spear made, I shall believe our Lord is risen. Then the next Sunday evening Jesus is in their midst, transfigured, beautiful ; and He is saying, 'Thomas, reach forth thine hand, and touch, and be convinced—it is thy test.' And do we ever read that Thomas did it? Never. And do you dream he peered into the gashes? Here was his little test, and he forgot his test. The little particular was swept aside, in the overwhelming argument of love. It was the look, it was the tone, it was the love and gentleness of Christ that won the day. Thomas was at His feet crying, My God!

FORTIETH SUNDAY

Morning

THE SWORD AND THE TROWEL

Passage to be read : Neh. iv. 1-23.

NEHEMIAH has been cup-bearer to the King of Persia ; he has been fasting and praying over Jerusalem and over all the ruin that had befallen that city. Now he is living and working in Jerusalem, inspiring his brethren, marshalling them for work, and more than once he ascribes that change of circumstances to the fact that 'the good hand of God was on him.' Does not that show what a great soul he was? He had left an easy life, and every comfort, and an honourable post, and the deference of a city—he had left all that for a life of incredible toil, and sleepless watching, and ridicule and weariness. Yet so far was Nehemiah from complaining that he took up his cross as if it were his crown. Does that not recall a greater than Nehemiah? Was there not Another, who, though He was rich, yet for our sakes became poor? Christ dwelt in the glory of the King of Kings, amid a beauty far surpassing that of Susa ; yet in the fulness of the time He left the palace, and came unto His own though they received Him not, and toiled and prayed and suffered and died, amid the taunts and obloquy of men, that our ruined humanity might be restored.

NOW this great chapter is a record of work. I wish then to gather some working lessons from it. And first, *all true work calls for whole-heartedness.* We read

in the Arabian Nights and other stories of walls that rose in a single night by magic. But the only magic in *this* work of wall-building was the magic we read of in verse six—the people had a mind to work. They were whole-hearted, enthusiastic, eager. God gave to all of them the gift of concentration. And there is no magic, in any Arabian story, that helps on work so mightily as that. I heard of a gentleman who was talking to another about a mutual friend who had failed in business. And he said, 'No wonder that he failed, he starved his work, he did not even put *himself* into it.' And we may be sure nothing will ever be built unless the builders put themselves into it. Is not God in creation a whole-hearted worker? The tiniest weed that flowers among the stones is as finely perfect as the greatest cedar. Was not Christ in Galilee a whole-hearted worker? He never dealt carelessly with any comer. Whole-heartedness is one mark of all heaven's working. It distinguished these toilers at Jerusalem. And none of us will ever come to anything, or find life growing rich and deep and beautiful, unless we begin by having a mind to work.

THEN *all true work is done in the teeth of difficulties.*

Let us read this chapter to ourselves if we would know the difficulties that fronted Nehemiah. Men mocked him; everywhere were enemies; he was charged with rebellion; even the stoutest grew weary. The mere toil of clearing away the rubbish might well have exhausted the power of the strongest. Yet in the teeth of all these obstacles, slowly but surely the great work advanced. And the best work is always done that way. It was in little sailing-vessels, of some 160 tons, that the first explorers into the Antarctic braved the perils of the storm and ice. The boys may have read in school that beautiful poem 'Lycidas,' which seems like the easy creation of a day. Yet we know now how Milton revised and altered and fought with difficulties and overcame

them. There are single lines in the poetry of Tennyson that took him days of earnest thought to write. No true work that is worth the doing is done easily. Like the work of Jesus for the saving of men, and like the work of these Jewish builders of the wall, it is wrought out in the teeth of difficulty.

NEXT, *all true work is accompanied with prayer.* The book of Nehemiah is a book of deeds, but it is also pre-eminently a book of prayer. As we watch the builders busy at their task, we know it is the atmosphere of prayer that they are breathing. It was Luther who said that to labour is to pray, and in many spiritual senses that is true. But the highest service never hinders prayer, nor does time spent in prayer ever hinder service. Prayer is the atmosphere the worker breathes; prayer is the beating heart behind the hand. I heard the other evening of a little girl who was very sorely vexed by her wild brother. He used to set traps for birds out in the court, and his sister would pray that no birds might be caught. But birds *were* caught, in spite of all her prayers, and her girlish faith was sorely tried over it. One night, however, there was a new look on her face. She knelt down beside her cot to pray as usual. She prayed, 'Dear Lord, don't let any birds be caught in Willie's trap'—and then glancing up at her nurse, she added, 'I know they won't, for I broke the trap before coming in.' You see she was learning in her own childish way that work and prayer must always go together. She would never have thought of breaking up the trap, and probably would never have had the courage to do it, unless she had begun to pray about it first. It was that lesson that the builders learned. And as life advances, and we find how full the world is of traps that are far more dangerous than Willie's, we learn that without prayer we cannot work, and without work we cannot pray.

LASTLY, *all true work is done in the soldier's spirit.* These men were the bearers of the sword and trowel. They toiled, but they were always ready for battle. They laboured, but at the sound of the trumpet they would muster. Their work then was not a work of peace, their work was a warfare in disguise. All work is that, but especially is it true of the great work of being a good Christian. We are all builders, and the wall is rising, and underneath it is the sure foundation. But we too, even as we build, must take to ourselves the whole armour of God. The sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God, must be ours in every day of toil.

FORTIETH SUNDAY

Evening

THE ASCENSION

Passage to be read : Luke xxiv. 36-53.

TEN appearances of the risen Lord are recorded in the New Testament, and of these no fewer than five occurred on the day of resurrection. Of the ten appearances Luke narrates three—(1) that to the disciples on the road to Emmaus (xxiv. 13-35); (2) that to the ten apostles and others (xxiv. 36-49); (3) that on the occasion of the Ascension (xxiv. 50-51), separated by an interval of days from the preceding one, though we might not gather that from a hasty reading of the chapter. Let us remember, too, that from resurrection to ascension there elapsed a period of forty days, and let us recall how often a like period had figured in the story of the Bible. For forty days Moses was on the Mount, preparing for his deliverance of the law. For forty days

Elijah was in the wilderness before he came forth for his great work in Israel. For forty days Jesus Himself was in the desert, at the beginning of His public ministry. May it not be that these forty resurrection-days were a preface to that glorious ministry in heaven, which Jesus is to carry on for evermore?

THE disciples then were gathered together, probably in that very upper chamber which was now hallowed with all manner of blessed memory, when Jesus (though the doors were shut for fear of the Jews) appeared in their midst and said, 'Peace be unto you.' One marks the suddenness of Christ's procedure now. He had suddenly left the two disciples at Emmaus. He suddenly stands amid the ten disciples here. In the action and movement of the risen Jesus there is an unexpected and arresting swiftness that we do not find in the days before the cross. The disciples were scared (for the Greek word means that). It was Jesus, but so altered that He seemed a spirit. And once again we can do nothing but marvel at the timely and wise compassion of the Lord. He did not rebuke them—He knew that they were dust. He bade them touch Him and look at His hands and feet, and handle Him. It was only to a worshipping and adoring Mary that He could say, 'Touch me not (thy faith hath made thee whole), for I ascend unto the Father.' They touched Him, and never forgot that touch. One touch of a hand will alter a life sometimes. I think that John was living this hour again when long years afterwards he began his priceless letter by speaking of what our hands have handled of the Word of Life (1 John i. 1). Then a great joy, like a tide, swept over them. And they could not believe, they were so glad. Not long ago Christ found them sleeping for sorrow (Luke xxii. 45), and now He found them disbelieving for joy. Do not forget, then, that joy can hinder faith. It may be as great a foe to faith as sorrow sometimes is.

There was no door to shut or open here, as there was with little Rhoda in the Acts; yet when Rhoda opened not the gate for gladness (Acts xii. 14), she was like the ten, who believed not for joy.

BUT Jesus is very tender with such unbelief, for it is as if the sunshine (and not sin) were blinding men. He called for food, and they gave Him a piece of fish. Jerusalem was always well supplied with that. And I dare say the two, who had walked with Him to Emmaus, thought He would break it, and suddenly disappear. But 'God fulfils Himself in many ways,' and Christ had other purposes to serve. He took it, and did eat before them. Who of them now could say this was a spirit? *Once* many had believed (on the hillside) when Christ made others eat. *Now* they believed because He Himself ate. Then Jesus led them into the heart of Scripture. He went back to the law and the prophets and the psalms. He read that old story in the light of all that happened till their hearts burned and glowed at the interpretation. Can you wonder that in the Book of Acts the disciples should be so mighty in the Word? A single hour will sometimes teach us more than the dull strivings of half a score of years. And in that one hour, in the upper chamber with Christ, Scripture became a new book to the disciples. Never forget how earnestly and constantly our Lord appealed to the testimony of the Word. Jesus dwelt deep in history and psalm and prophecy. There never was such a student of the Scripture. He used it as His weapon in the desert. He confuted His enemies with their own sacred books. He found His solace in it. He read His mission there. He went back to its deep words when hanging on Calvary. He taught it more urgently than ever when He rose. The Bible was full of authority and power for a Saviour who had risen from the dead.

THEN when the forty days were over, and the closing counsels and commissions had been given, Christ led His disciples through the streets of Jerusalem, and over Kedron, and past the shadows of Gethsemane. I think the little company were all silent; their hearts were too full of memories for speech. Then they passed out to the upland ground near Bethany, and Jesus lifted up His hands, and blessed them. And while He blessed them, a cloud gathered, and parted them, and Jesus was carried up into heaven. How simple and how reserved is the whole scene! There is no chariot of fire; no sound of music. It was a fitting departure of One who would not strive nor cry, and who had come down on the mown grass gently as the rain. And did the disciples sorrow or lament? They returned to Jerusalem *with great joy* (v. 52). Christ had not left them; He would be with them still. Their Lord and they would never be parted more. A little before, they could not believe for joy. Now they were joyful just because they believed.

FORTY-FIRST SUNDAY

Morning

ESTHER MADE QUEEN

Passage to be read : Esther ii. 1-23.

TO-DAY we are taken far away from Palestine into the strange scenes of an Eastern court. Our story is filled with the sensuous life of Persia. Ahasuerus was a Persian king, reigning at a time when the empire was very vast (i. 1); and from such hints, and for many other reasons, it is almost certain that Ahasuerus was Xerxes. The boys who are studying Greek history know all about Xerxes. They have struggled through his story in Herodotus. There is something in the extravagant career of that great tyrant that sets the dullest imagination working. We remember the mighty army that he gathered against Greece, and how he built a bridge across the Hellespont. We remember how, when the bridge was destroyed by storm, he scourged the waves and cast fetters into them. And the glorious stand of Leonidas at Thermopylæ, and the battle of Phalerum and the Grecian victory—these splendid deeds make the blood course faster yet. It is with that king, then, that our passage is concerned. We get a glimpse here into his inner life. I hope that every boy, when he learns about Xerxes in school, will remember this little book of the Old Testament.

WELL, in the chapter which is our theme for to-day, we have the unmaking and the making of a queen. Vashti has fallen. She has disobeyed her lord. She

has been discharged for ever from the royal favour. And now, in ways that only the East could practise, another queen must replace the fallen favourite. She need not be a princess or a peeress. Persia is not so intolerant as Servia. Only let a maiden be forthcoming who can win the king, and the crown will soon be placed upon her brow. Now among the officers of Ahasuerus' court, there was an exiled Jew named Mordecai. And he had a cousin whose Jewish name was Hadassah, but who was called by the Persians Esther—the star. She was an orphan, and Mordecai had brought her up. She was very beautiful, and as good as she was beautiful. She charmed everybody who ever met with her; who knew but that she might charm the king? So she was led into the royal presence, and her maidenly wisdom shone out most brightly then. She had learned (what some maidens never seem to learn) that beauty unadorned is then adorned the most. The other claimants were bejewelled and bedecked. The dresses at Holyrood were nothing to theirs. But Esther (wise girl) required nothing but what Hegai, the king's chamberlain, appointed (v. 15). And the king loved her, and he made her his queen, and there was great feasting, and release of captives. And the chapter closes by telling how Mordecai and Esther baffled a plot to assassinate Ahasuerus.

FIRST, then, let my readers note that *there is a Godward side to human history*. As we read of Xerxes in our lesson-books at school, we seldom think that the hand of God is there. We only think of the human passion of it, and of the insensate pride, and of the might of marching armies. But here is that same Xerxes in the Bible; and the curtain is lifted from his family history; and the great conqueror is in the power of that God who is ordering the footsteps of His Jewish people. There is a Godward side, then, to that human history.

The proudest wills are under the sovereign Will. God says to Nebuchadnezzar, 'Thou art My servant.' He says to Cyrus, 'Thou art My battle-axe.' And armies are marching, and men are toiling to-day, and brains are busy and restless and full of schemes; but we believe that over it all is God.

NEXT mark *what great things the Gospel has done for women.* We have only to read this little book attentively to see what women were in Persian eyes. They had no rights, and very little liberty. They were never regarded with the reverence of love. The obedience demanded of them was not that of joy, but the slavish obedience that must never question. No Persian would have dreamed of taking their counsel, or of seeking full and satisfying fellowship with them. Women were playthings for the lighter hours; at the best 'a thing of beauty' and 'a joy for ever.' Now contrast that degradation and repression with the lofty place of womanhood to-day. Think of the schools in which the girls are educated, of the games they share in, of their healthy lives. Remember the noble deeds that women have done, and the noble books that have been written by women; recall the sweetness and liberty of Christian homes, and all the wonder and love of Christian motherhood, and you will see what Jesus Christ has done. I might understand a man not being a Christian; but a woman—that I cannot understand. For it means that she denies and disowns the One who has done more for her than all the world beside.

THEN, lastly, we are meant to learn from Esther *how God can exalt those of low degree.* He can take an unknown maiden from His people, and set a crown of gold upon her head. No one expected this honour less than Esther. She was the last in the world to say that she deserved it. But, like a true Jewess, she would

remember David, for the Lord of David was her shepherd, too. Now I do not think that Esther was to be envied. Hers was a very perilous pre-eminence. It were happier to live out one's life among the shadows, than in the fierce light that beats upon a throne. But when God, through the grace of Jesus Christ, exalts the lowly, it is not to the dubious glories of an Esther. It is to joy unending. It is to holy peace. It is to a throne beyond the reach of storm.

FORTY-FIRST SUNDAY

Evening

WAITING

Passage to be read : Acts i. 9-26.

OUR lesson begins with the narrative of the Ascension, and the reader will remember that this is the *second* account of the departure of Jesus into heaven. The Gospel of Luke closes with the story, and now the Acts of the Apostles opens with it. The event that ends the earthly ministry of Jesus begins the ministry upon the throne. We are not to think of Jesus' work in heaven as something quite different from His work on earth. All He accomplished here was but the beginning (v. 1) of a service that He shall carry on for ever. Now the Ascension is the link between the two. It is the passage of the unchanging Lord from the lower to the higher sphere of service. Hence Luke concludes his Gospel with it, and then puts it in the forefront of the Acts. Note, too, in the descriptions given by Luke, how *sober and subdued* the colouring is. When Luke tells of Pentecost he is thrilled with excitement. He is vivid, and picturesque, almost dramatic, when he relates the

healing of the lame man at the Gate Beautiful. But a few simple and very quiet words are all that he uses for the Ascension, yet to *us* that seems the greatest wonder in the world. Two thoughts are suggested by Luke's simple statement. The first is, how *Christ-like* the Ascension was. He who came down like rain on the mown grass, and who would not strive nor cry nor lift up His voice in the streets, will not go home with any sound of trumpet. And the second is, how *natural* it seemed to the little company who went forth to Olivet. They had always felt that Jesus lived in heaven. Could they be greatly surprised when He went there? The disciples *were* astounded at the cross. Death seemed so alien from the life of Jesus. But they were *not* astounded at the Ascension. They worshipped, and went to the city with great joy.

SO the little company returned to Jerusalem, and we read that they went up into an upper room (v. 13). There can be little question that it was the very room that was already fragrant with memories of Jesus. Here, on the night on which He was betrayed, the bread had been broken and the cup had been drunk. Here they had sat, with the doors barred for fear of the Jews, when Jesus had appeared in their midst on the Lord's day. Probably from this very room they had gone forth to witness the Ascension upon Olivet. They were *not* forgetting the things that were behind when they returned under the familiar roof. The past was blending with the future for them; the agony, with the words 'until He come.' Try to imagine the company gathered there. There are the women who had ministered to Jesus and had held fast to Him when every one else had fled. There is Mary, His mother, and this is the last glimpse we get of Mary, and she is worshipping the Son she once had nursed. His brethren are there, and only six months before (John tells us) they did not believe in Him. It

was not so long ago since these very brethren had sought to have Him arrested as a madman. And now, for the ten days between Ascension and Pentecost, that company continues in united prayer. Their hearts are changed, their doubts have passed away, the command of Jesus is of supreme importance now. They are waiting for the promise of the Father, for the impending baptism of the Holy Ghost.

BUT one preparatory act still remained to be done. The number of the disciples was not complete. The little band must be at its full strength when the Spirit of God touched them with sevenfold power. So Peter rises—the same, and yet how changed! How different from the impulsive, boisterous Simon! He is spokesman yet (such men are chieftains always), but a great fall has bowed him to the dust, and a great love has set him on a rock, and there is a quiet dignity of sweet restraint about him now, that makes him ten times the man he was in Galilee. He would have hurled hard names at Judas once. *Now* Judas ‘was guide to them that took Jesus.’ He would have pictured his doom in fiery colours once. *Now* Judas has just gone ‘to his own place.’ If ever a man came out of the darkness glorified, I think that man was gallant Simon Peter. At Peter’s request, then, and after a brief sermon, a disciple was chosen to fill the place of Judas, and we may note these two features of the action. Firstly, every one present had a hand in it. They all prayed and all gave forth their lots. Secondly, the qualification of the disciple was twofold—he must have companied with the Lord Jesus from His baptism, and he must have been a witness of the Resurrection. Matthias was chosen. The lot fell on Matthias. Can the reader cite instances of the lot from the Old Testament? It was entirely discarded after Pentecost, and I think that the Moravians are the only body of Christians who still practise the casting of the lot.

AND now three simple lessons from the chapter. Firstly, *God does not want us to be always gazing.* The disciples would have stayed on the *Mount of Transfiguration*, but a demoniac boy was waiting at the foot. The women would have lingered *where their Lord was laid*, but they were bidden to depart with the glad news that Christ was risen. So *here* the two men in white apparel said, 'Ye men of Galilee, why stand ye gazing?—have you no duties to fulfil at home, and do you not know that Christ will come again?' Secondly, *remember there are unknown disciples.* No man on earth knows who Matthias was. There is not a trace of him in any Gospel; we never meet him in history again. Yet he had been with Jesus since His baptism, and seen Him after His rising from the dead; and now it is the unknown follower who is chosen, to take the honoured place of a disciple. God, then, has many hidden servants. We do not know them, but the Master does. If they are faithful in the toil that no one sees, they shall have the ten cities by and by. Lastly, note *there is purpose in God's delay.* For ten days the disciples had to wait. God did not send the Holy Spirit at once. It must have been hard to abide in that upper room and keep the glorious secret of Ascension. Yet the ten days were educative days. The power of fervent prayer was realised; the company were knit into a surer brotherhood upon their knees; the glory of Christ shone on them more transcendently. There was a deep purpose in that delay of God. He had a fatherly meaning in His tarrying. And whenever in *our* life the delays of heaven seem hard, we do well to remember that upper room.

FORTY-SECOND SUNDAY

Morning

PLOT AGAINST THE JEWS

Passage to be read : Esther iii. 1-15.

NOTHING is known about this Haman who now figures so conspicuously in the story. He was some court officer who had won the favour of Xerxes, and been swung into eminence by the king's caprice. We do not know much about David Rizzio, yet Rizzio had extraordinary influence with Queen Mary. So Haman had prospered amid the intrigues of Shushan, till Xerxes could not do enough for him. The royal command was given that the court was to reverence Haman ; and that means far more than that all were to do him honour. It means that a kind of worship was to be rendered him which would almost put Haman in the ranks of the divinities. Now Mordecai had lost much in Persia ; the life there had destroyed many ideals for him. But he was still a Jew, proud of his Jewish ancestry, and filled with the passionate faith of the true Jew in the one living and true God. It was impossible for him, then, to worship Haman. All the stubborn heroism of his Jewish heart awoke when the command was proclaimed through the palace courts. His conscience could yield to Xerxes at a hundred points. But on this point he was like adamant.

WORD of this was speedily brought to Haman. An Eastern court is full of spies and flatterers. And Haman, who had caught the habit of mad anger from his master, broke into uncontrollable passion on hearing of it. His first thought was to have Mordecai slain; but then a far larger and sweeter revenge suggested itself. If Mordecai had refused because he was a Jew, must not every Jew secretly be a rebel? Haman determined on rooting out the Jews who still dwelt in large numbers throughout the Persian Empire, but when he came to King Xerxes to get the needed mandate, he was far too crafty to tell his real motive. The Jews were disloyal subjects—that was the charge he lodged. It was not against Haman but against Xerxes that they sinned. That was not the first time, and it was not the last, that persecution took up the cry of 'Traitor.' We marvel at the indifference of Xerxes. That he should have granted permission for such murder seems inexplicable. But we have known Sultans who were not profoundly sorry when the Christians of Armenia were massacred, and Xerxes was probably a worse man than the Sultan. Permission was given. The royal seal was pledged. Couriers went out post-haste throughout the empire. On a certain day, and all upon the same day, the Jews in Persia were to be utterly wiped out. What came of it all we shall see in our next lesson. Meantime let us note one strange coincidence. The plot was laid on the eve of Passover—the thirteenth day of the first month (v. 12). Was that the date of any other plot? Was no other work of darkness hatched then? The 'wheel had come full circle' for the Jews, when on that date they plotted the death of Christ.

FIRST note, then, the truth of the old proverb, that
no man is so angry as he who is in the wrong.
Haman had not a single title to reverence; he was nearer

kin to a demon than a god ; yet when one official of the court refused to honour him, instantly we find him 'full of wrath' (v. 5). Had he been conscious that he deserved his honours, he would have taken this refusal very differently. It was just because our Lord *was* Son of God, that He would not strive nor cry nor lift up His voice in the streets. But Haman knew how insecure he was ; he knew how utterly false were these divine ascriptions, and that made him feverish to assert his dignity. Cain was angry and he slew his brother. Naaman was angry when he heard about the washing. Herod was angry when the wise men failed him. Haman was full of wrath at Mordecai. All these men (and many more in Scripture) were fighting against goodness and against God, and they were angry just because of that. Will you remember that the next time you are passionate? Will you recall that in the next fit of temper? Will you ask yourself, 'Am I not cross to-day, just because I am disobedient or unkind?' There is an anger that is very righteous. There is a wrath which is the wrath of the Lamb. But generally (and almost always with children) when we are angry we are in the wrong.

NEXT mark *how far the influence of our acts may reach.*

That was one great lesson which Mordecai learned. I am sure he never thought of involving others, when he refused to do obeisance to the favourite. It was a small matter ; the world would never hear of it ; at the most there would be another court quarrel over it. Little did Mordecai think, when he refused, that in a day or two the couriers would be galloping with their sealed letters to every Persian hamlet. Is not that a parable of how our actions spread, until like the ripples they break on every shore? The couriers of God are far more swift and certain than the Persian horsemen who went at Haman's bidding. Our actions, for good or evil, radiate

out; we are involving others when we never dream of it. We shall touch the lives of distant women and children whenever we refuse like Mordecai. The latest biographer of Principal Cairns tells us that when Cairns stood by Luther's grave at Wittenberg, he thought, 'But for Luther, there had neither been a Scotland to send out pilgrim students of theology, nor a Germany to receive them.'

LASTLY, see *how God controls even the casting of lots.* Verse seven is a somewhat difficult verse. You might think they had kept casting lots for a whole year; but what it means is, that to find the lucky day for the proposed massacre, they cast lots before Haman on a certain day in January (so to speak), and when at length the final lot was cast, the day for the murder was found to be in December. That is, a year must be allowed to lapse before the project was put into effect. No sword was to be unsheathed against a Jew until twelve months had run their course. Do you think that the casting of that lot was chance? Was it mere accident that it happened so? It is surely nobler to see the hand of God in it, outstretched for the help of His covenanted people. They had time now to baffle the intrigue. They could make ready against the day of slaughter. Had the lot fallen upon an early date, Mordecai would have been powerless to act. It was no chance that the lot fell on Jonah. It was no chance that it singled out Matthias (Acts i. 26). The finger of God was in the matter there, and the finger of God was in the matter here. 'The lot is cast into the lap, but the whole disposing thereof is of the Lord' (Prov. xvi. 33).

FORTY-SECOND SUNDAY

Evening

CURE OF THE LAME MAN

Passage to be read : Acts iii. 1-18.

IT is perhaps wrong to call this the first miracle after Pentecost, though it is generally thought of in that way. The boldness of the disciples after the fiery baptism, and the conviction wrought upon the hearts of thousands, and the adding to the church, after one sermon, of a great multitude of men and women—all these, for such as have the eyes to see, are as truly miraculous and supernatural as the healing of the lame man. We are very apt to confine the word *miracle* to things that we can see and touch and hear. We forget that the conversion of a soul is as truly miraculous as the curing of an ailment. It takes the power of God to change a life as surely as to make a lame man leap. This miracle, then, was *not* the first after Pentecost. We must guard the meaning of these noble words. But it was so remarkable, so unexpected, so fully in line with the ministry of Jesus, that it made an instant and profound impression. Every one of us knows the story well. There is not a more graphic chapter in the Bible. It will be best then to leave the scene alone, and to find one or two lessons in the verses.

FIRST, then, let us note *the contrast between the beggar and the beautiful gate*. The Beautiful Gate was of Corinthian brass. Like the wonderful gates of the Baptistry at Florence (that Michael Angelo said might have served for Paradise), it was adorned with very perfect skill. It represented all that art could do. It

was the masterpiece of the workmanship of man. When the sun glanced on it the people would cry 'Beautiful,' until at last it got that as its name. Yet here, beside it, was a lame man, begging. He lay in the shadow of the finest art. He was lame and helpless, he was poor and needy, and the wonderful gate was not a yard away. Are there no contrasts like that in our great cities? Is there nothing like that in Glasgow or in London? Beautiful gates opening on beautiful homes, and very near to them outcasts such as this?

OR we might view it in quite another way: *the beautiful gate was very near the sufferer*. I mean that of all the gates into the sanctuary, *this gate was the finest and the fairest*, and just because this man was poor and helpless he found himself beside that fairest gate. Had he been strong, he would never have been there. He would have been out in the streets earning his livelihood. Who knows but he might have been an idle rioter, had he been vigorous and whole like other men. But he was lame—the hand of God had touched him. He had a heavy cross to carry every day. And just because he had that cross to bear, his life was spent close to a beautiful gate. Have you a lame brother or a weakly sister? There is a beautiful gate very near that sufferer too.

ONCE more observe *what the kindness of friends can do*. It was friends who brought him to the spot where he was healed. The man was helpless. He could not move a step. He would have lain in his garret all his days, unaided. But the poor are very kindly to the poor, and every morning he got a friendly *lift*. You see they were doing far more than they ever thought of. We *always* do more than we think, when we are kind. They carried their poor comrade to get half-pence, but the day came when (thanks to them) the man

got healed. Did you ever give any one a hand towards a Gate Beautiful? Did you ever bring any lonely neighbour to your beautiful home or to your beautiful church? It seems a small and simple thing to do, yet who can tell what the results shall be?

AGAIN, this shines out clearly in the story, *our choicest opportunities come unsought*. Peter and John were not bustling through Jerusalem saying, 'I wonder if we can find any one to help.' Peter and John were quietly going to pray as they had been taught to do long since at home. Had they neglected church that afternoon, they would have lost a great deal more than an hour's worship. They would have lost the glorious opportunity of finding what an ascended Lord could do. The fact is, God takes us by surprise. Our great hours come when we never look for them. We are busy toiling at our common duty, when out of the infinite the angel comes. If you want to be famous, never think of fame. If you wish to be great, forget all about greatness. Like Peter and John, hold fast to common duty (even in the dull and sleepy afternoon), and some day you shall find your lame man at the gate.

THEN note *Christ gives us more than we expect*. There is an overflow in all His gifts. One of the great words of the Bible is *abundantly*, and in Christ's dealings there is great abundance. This poor man at the gate looked for an alms. He would have been perfectly satisfied with sixpence. But instead of sixpence he got health and strength, and that is the generous way of Jesus Christ. The man who was let down through the cottage-roof got his sins forgiven as well as his palsy healed. The prodigal would have lived contented in the kitchen; but instead of that he had the robe and ring. One thing let every one of us be sure of: that Jesus will do more for us than we expect;

and none knew that better than the lame man here, when he begged for a little coin, and got a cure.

THEN, lastly, *it is quite natural to leap at first*. The man went walking and leaping, praising God. It takes a little time to find one's feet, after a great experience like that. Give the man ten or twenty years of city life, and he will walk as sedately as any other citizen. *First* they shall mount up with wings as eagles, says the prophet; *then* they shall run (as children always do); and *then*, when time and experience have wrought their sobering work, they shall walk, and (thank God) shall not faint. Do not object to preliminary leaping. Do not be hard on a little wild enthusiasm in the man who has really been healed by Christ. Time will convert that spiritual electricity into a driving and illuminating power. Emotion will be translated by the years into the strength of action and of character.

FORTY-THIRD SUNDAY

Morning

ESTHER PLEADING FOR HER PEOPLE

Passages to be read : Esther iv. 1-17 ; v. 1-8.

GREAT was the sorrow of the Jews when the news of the impending doom spread among them. The laws of the Medes and Persians were unalterable, and there was little hope of any respite. Many a Jewish father must have fervently wished that he had returned to Palestine when Cyrus gave permission. *Now* the opportunity was past ; there could be nothing but a fearful looking for of judgment. But the heart of Mordecai did not fail him. It is in such hours that strong men show themselves. So long as Esther loved him and was true to him, there was a gleam of light in the dark and angry sky. And our passage (which does not take us on to Esther's triumph) is a most inspiring and, indeed, thrilling story of what can be achieved by faith and heroism. There were high barriers now between Mordecai and Esther, but Mordecai overcame all difficulties. There was some estrangement between King Xerxes and his queen ; it was at the risk of her life that she attempted anything, yet she made the attempt, with what success we shall see. It is a great thing to have a friend at court who will intercede before the throne in time of danger. Remember that there is One fairer than fifty Esthers, who ever liveth to make intercession for us.

NOW note first that *elevation had not altered Esther*. She had been a nameless and unnoticed girl once, so far as a beautiful young woman can ever be that. Then suddenly, and with one swift turn of fortune's wheel, she had been raised to a perilous and very dazzling splendour. It was enough to turn the calmest head. But Esther still held true to Mordecai; the God of Bethel was her only God; she could not cut herself away from Jewish sorrows, or live indifferent to Jewish tears. And if we knew nothing more of Esther than this fealty that no glories could destroy, we should reverence her as one of the noble women of the world. The Venetian ambassador, in one of his despatches, makes an illuminative reference to Cardinal Wolsey. He says that when Wolsey came to England he used to say, 'The king will do so and so.' Afterwards his words were, 'We shall do so and so'; and at last, 'I shall do so and so.' His was a great character ruined by elevation, and by the pride that dogs the steps of elevation. But Joseph and David and Esther were greater than he. Keats has a singularly beautiful sonnet that begins 'Bright star, would I were steadfast as thou art'—and Esther means a star.

NEXT mark *the safety that sometimes lies in venturing*. It was an act of daring to approach the king. He and his queen had been parted for a month. It was not in the interests of Haman's plot that a Jewess should have the royal ear, and no doubt Haman had worked for this separation. But of all this Esther knew nothing. She only knew she had fallen into disfavour. And there were tiring-women and chamberlains in plenty, to warn her of the awful consequences of intrusion. She took her life in her hand in venturing. Was there any likelihood that she should touch the sceptre? But Esther had a heart to feel what *this* means, 'He that loseth his life for My sake shall find it.' Mr. Froude, in his fine story of the Elizabethan seamen, makes a remark about

the stirring affairs of that great time. 'Nothing,' he says, 'was to be gained by concession ; the only salvation was in daring.' That was true of Esther in this crisis, and there are times when it will be true of every one of us. There are times when to be heroic is true prudence ; when to venture nobly is to be doubly safe. When the call of Christ comes, 'Launch out into the deep,' everything may be lost for want of venturing. I think I can see the eyes of Esther burning as her bold plan sprang into shape before her. She did not know—though we know now—that the One she served had eyes as a flame of fire.

A GAIN, *we have a Court that is not hedged by barriers.* As we read our lesson one thing strikes us forcibly. It is the restriction that fenced in the Persian Court. It was supremely difficult for an outsider to get near the sacred person of the king. Mordecai could get no admittance because of his mourning-garb. He was in sackcloth, and they that live in kings' houses wear soft clothing. And even the members of the royal family could not run when they pleased into the royal presence. They had to wait till the king summoned them. There was the terror of assassination in all this ; there was the pride that must be fed in isolation ; it may be there was a touch of shame, for there were countless deeds of darkness in the court. The Persian monarch styled himself 'king of kings,' and because he was that, his court was barred and guarded. But the King of kings whom we obey and worship has a door that stands wide open to the world. No one is barred because he is in mourning. He is doubly welcome in such garb. None are denied because they come unsummoned. The invitation is too wide for that. Let us read over this story again, till we realise how earthly courts are guarded, and we shall feel afresh the wonder and the joy of the audience and the presence of our King.

LASTLY, let this be noticed in the chapter, that *if we are advanced, it is to be God's instruments.* 'Who knows,' said Mordecai to Esther, 'but that you were exalted, just that you might be of service in this hour,' and events showed that Mordecai was right. It was *not* for Esther's own glory or delight that God had given her this strange pre-eminence. It was that in the hour which was to strike, she might be instrumental in His hand. And if we are raised in the least above our fellows by any talent, or grace, or gift, or beauty, let us remember Esther in the palace, and hold what we have in trust for Esther's God.

FORTY-THIRD SUNDAY

Evening

PETER AND JOHN BEFORE THE COUNCIL

Passage to be read : Acts iv. 1-22.

AN old writer has said that a miracle was like the bell before the sermon, it caught the attention of the people, and brought them together for the preaching of the Word. Now that was true of the miracle at the Gate Beautiful. As with the summons of some clear-toned bell, it brought a vast congregation to the disciples. And in the closing part of the third chapter, we have the sermon that Peter preached to them. But the miracle and the discourse which followed it were very abhorrent to the ruling powers. They thought that they had triumphed over Jesus, and here was His cause more visible than ever. Peter and John were apprehended instantly. They were going to the Temple, and were taken to prison instead. I think that Peter and John sang hymns that night, as lustily as Paul and

Silas did at Philippi. Then in the morning they were led before the rulers. The council of state was set, and they were stationed in the midst of it. And they were asked (as if the questioners did not know) by what authority or name they had done this? Peter, briefly, respectfully, and manfully, declared that the power had been the power of Jesus. He showed his auditors how prophecy was fulfilled. He declared that there was no salvation out of Christ. And though to the hearers this was hateful doctrine, and though they would willingly have silenced it for ever, yet there was the lame man—lame no more—among them, and *that* was an argument not to be gainsaid. What could be done? Was there no help for it? Could none devise means for stopping the rising tide? That most august and venerable council revealed their impotence in the course they took. They laid a charge on Peter and on John that the name of Jesus was not to pass their lips. They might as well have charged the breaking sea to cease its thundering when the tempest blew. Peter and John were bound to disobey. Even as Jews, must they not be loyal to God? So they were loosed, and being loosed, they went (as we all do) to their own company (v. 23).

NOW the first thing that arrests us here is this, *how ready we are to envy others' influence*. You would have thought that the Pharisees and priests, having the interests of their land at heart, would have been heartily glad to get a lame man healed. You would have thought they might have argued like this, 'Whoever did it is a secondary matter; the great thing is that suffering has been ended, so let us all give thanks to God for that.' Instead of that we read that they were grieved. They were heart-harassed; they were quite sick with envy. If one of their *own* rank had wrought the miracle, it had been well. But it was all wrong when Peter and John did it. Do you think that that spirit has quite died

away? The boys will discover that as they grow older. Sometimes we call that spirit party-spirit, but in its essence it is nothing less than envy. It would have been sweet if we could have done this or that, but some one else has done it and it is torture. We must remember that God has many instruments. We must pray and struggle for a new humility. We must take as our spiritual motto for the week that 'God fulfils Himself in many ways.'

THE next thing that we observe is this, *there is no mistaking one who has been with Jesus*. When they saw the boldness of Peter and of John, they took knowledge of them that they had been with Jesus. That is not the mere statement of a fact of history. It does *not* mean that it dawned on the council then that these men had been in Jesus' company. John was on friendly terms with the authorities, and I fancy that all of them had heard of Peter. It means that when they saw the boldness of the two, they recognised the spirit of Jesus Christ. Like a flash, the demeanour of Christ upon His trial rose up before them; it was He who spoke through the two prisoners. There is no mistaking one who has been with Jesus. He may speak out as Simon Peter did; or like John he may not open his lips; but the world has an instinct for the Master's presence, and can tell when a man has truly been with Christ. I dare say you have all heard the eastern story of the lump of clay that exhaled an exquisite fragrance. And when some one asked it how it smelled so sweet, it replied that it had been lying near a musk-rose for days. There is an unmistakable fragrance in a life that dwells continually near the Rose of Sharon.

AGAIN this noble truth breaks from these verses, that *loyalty to God is our first duty*. It must have been hard for Peter to disobey the council. I think it would

be harder still for John. They were both Jews, both steeped in Jewish feeling, nor had they lost their reverence for Jewish rule. Now comes the moment of crisis in their history. They are faced by the greatest choice to which a man is called. On the one hand is the past—the world—authority. On the other hand is the clear will of God. We know what Peter and John chose in that hour. It was very simply and very quietly done. Yet the future would have been far different for them both, and the story of Christendom would have been altered, had they swerved from the will of God in that decision. We can never tell the issues of our choices. They reach far further than we ever dream. We only know that when we choose as Peter did, we may leave the future with John's and Peter's Lord. The scene reminds us of Luther at the Diet, refusing to comply or to retract, and saying, 'Here stand I. I can do nought else. God help me. Amen.'

LASTLY, we mark this in the story, *the great arguments for a risen Christ are facts.* It was not the preaching of Peter that silenced the council. It was the presence of the man who had been healed. It was a *man*, touched by the power of heaven, who was the sure witness of an ascended Lord. It is by facts that we prove the resurrection. It is by the long history of Christendom. It is by the experiences of countless hearts that are inexplicable save for a living Christ. Men may deny that rising from the dead. They may think it is but an idle tale. But when they behold the man who has been healed, like the Jews they can say nothing against it.

FORTY-FOURTH SUNDAY

Morning

HAMAN AND MORDECAI

Passages to be read: Esther v. 9-14; vi. 1-14.

INSTEAD of telling her desire to the king immediately, Esther chose to delay matters for a little. There is a Latin proverb, *Cunctando restituit rem*—delay will sometimes save the situation; and though it is true that delays are often dangerous, sometimes (as here) they are tokens of true wisdom. Esther made a great feast for the king and Haman. Then she invited them to a second feast on the morrow. You can imagine how Haman's heart would glow, as he stepped forth from the banquetting chamber of the queen. His dreams were golden. His sky was full of glory. He had reached the pinnacle of his desire. Then suddenly, and in his proper place at the king's gate, he stumbled on his hated Mordecai—and there was no reverence *here*; no bowing or salaaming. It was intolerable to this intoxicated courtier. He hurries home, and unbosoms himself to his wife and to his friends; somehow, they must get rid of Mordecai. Lady Macbeth would have had him stabbed in the dark; but Lady Haman had a more politic way. Let them get ready a gallows (of twice the usual height), and then get the king's permission for a hanging. And so the gallows was built, and the gallows was used; but whom it was used for, we shall see by and by.

NOW that very night King Xerxes could not sleep. 'I think the king is but a man, as I am,' says Shakespeare in his great play of *Henry V.*; and the

attendants who watched King Xerxes tossing, would doubtless be whispering that to one another. They would smile to think that he commanded a hundred and twenty-seven provinces, yet could not command an hour's refreshing sleep. Generally, when an Eastern king was wakeful, he called for music. If he was a saint like David, God's statutes were his songs. But to-night, nothing would please this fevered autocrat, but that one of his chamber-boys should read to him. 'How do you know,' a Bedouin was asked, 'that there is a God?' 'In the same way,' he replied, 'that I know in looking at the sand when a man or beast has crossed the desert—by His footprints in the world around me.' And so in this story we hear nothing of God, but we feel that He knoweth what is in the darkness. The book that was brought was the Annals of the kingdom. The page that lay open bore Mordecai's name. For the first time Xerxes heard of the plot upon his life (ii. 21-23), and how it had been frustrated by Mordecai. He would reward this Jew in royal fashion—and with that good resolve he fell asleep. Then dawns the morning, and Haman is in the court, and the king's mind still runs on Mordecai. He summons Haman into the bedchamber, and asks, 'What shall be done to the man whom the king delighteth to honour?' And how Haman, thinking that the man in question was himself, suggested a royal procession through the streets; and how his heart grew like a stone, when he heard that the man was Mordecai, all that brings our splendid passage to a close.

NOW the first thing to impress us in these verses is *how the lack of a very little may spoil all*. Haman would have been supremely happy, but for this one Jew who sat in the king's gate. When he went home from the banquet of Queen Esther, he talked to his friends of nothing but his glory. I have no doubt they had heard it all before, but a king's favourite can take many liberties.

To crown all, there was this second banquet, to which the king and he had been summoned on the morrow. Yet whenever Haman caught a glimpse of Mordecai, his golden cup was filled with bitterness (v. 13). Had Mordecai only done him reverence, the sun would have shone in its full glory on Haman; but Mordecai refused to do obeisance, and somehow *that* took the brightness out of all. I think that the boys in Shushan envied Haman. If they had his horses and his chariots, would they not be happy? But as they grew older they would come to see that all the horses and chariots in the world, and all its feasts and all its gardens, might lose their charm through the lacking of one thing. Very often that one thing is love. The lack of love will take the glory from things, as certainly as Mordecai did. It is thus that in the new-found love of God, a man finds everything becoming new.

AGAIN, our passage teaches this very clearly, that *nothing is so blind as vanity*. We have a proverb that tells us love is blind, but vanity is blinder still. In that glorious story *Waverley*, when Captain Waverley goes to church for the first time in his regimentals, Scott remarks, 'There is no better antidote against entertaining too high an opinion of others, than having an excellent one of ourselves at the very same time.' He means that Captain Waverley was blind to the bewitching glances of Cecilia Stubbs, he was so taken up with his own new uniform. A blindness like that had fallen on the heart of Haman. He thought there was no one in the kingdom but himself. It never occurred to him that any one else than he could be the man whom the king delighted to honour. His vanity had made him very blind, and being blind he fell into the ditch. Will the girls especially keep that in mind? They will misread so much, if they are vain. The unutterable pity about conceited people is that they miss all that is best and worthiest in others.

The eyes of self-forgetfulness are clear. They penetrate the secrets wonderfully. I hope our pretty schoolgirls will remember that nothing is so blind as vanity.

THEN, lastly, we should observe *that the king's honours must not keep us from our duty*. Mordecai was led in triumph through the streets; the horse he rode was royally caparisoned; he was robed in one of the king's robes of state; he was proclaimed as the man whom the king delighteth to honour. Every roof was crowded, every window was thronged, from every lane and alley the folk came pouring, as Mordecai rode in state through Shushan. And then? 'Mordecai came again to the king's gate' (v. 13). He went right back to the place where his duty was. No crowds, or cheering, or pageantry, or show, could keep this brave man from the post of duty. Now, *our King* may honour us in many ways. He may give us great strength or very signal talents. Above all, He may so illuminate our hearts, that we may say, 'For us to live, is Christ.' But whatever the favours be, our post is still our post. Remember Mordecai and the gate. God in His love crowns us with glory and honour, but the honour must not keep us from our duty.

FORTY-FOURTH SUNDAY

Evening

PHILIP AND THE ETHIOPIAN

Passage to be read : Acts viii. 26-40.

PHILIP was in the full tides of work for Christ, when the message came from God that he must leave it. He had been preaching in Sebastè, the old city of Samaria, and his preaching had been crowned with

wonderful success, when suddenly there came the angel of the Lord with this summons to get southward towards Gaza. It was a strange command, swiftly and well obeyed. There was nothing of the spirit of Jonah about Philip. Perhaps Philip remembered Jesus in the desert, and thought he was going to meet his Master there. Then came the hour when the chariot rolled by. It was a very picturesque and lordly equipage. Its occupant was the chancellor of the Nubian exchequer, and he was reading aloud, as the Eastern custom is. A few broken syllables fell on Philip's ear in the brief respites of the jolting and the jarring, and Philip (to whom the Old Testament was doubly precious now) recognised the priceless chapter of Isaiah. Did he remember the prophecy of the psalms, 'Ethiopia shall stretch out her hands to God?' Here was the stretched-out hand of Ethiopia, and God had so ordered it that it was not stretched in vain. Philip ran up to the side of the chariot—it was going very slowly on that rough desert road. He asked the courtier if he understood the chapter. The answer came, 'How can I, without a guide?' And the passage closes with the preaching of a Saviour; and with the conversion, and the baptism, and the joy, of this true seeker from afar for God.

NOTE then *the value of a single soul*. It must have seemed very strange and dark to Philip that he should be summoned from his Samaritan work. The tide was with him; enthusiasm was heightening; vast crowds were moved by the preaching of Christ crucified. It would have been hard to leave all that through sickness; it was doubly hard to do it when well and strong. Could no one else be found for that desert work? Was it right to leave the thousands in Samaria for the single chariot of a southern courtier? I am sure that Philip had many a thought like that, for he was a man of like passions with ourselves. Then gradually it would grow very clear

to him that a single soul must be very dear to God. He would remember how the shepherd had left the ninety and nine, that the one sheep in the desert might be found. From that hour on to the day he died, Philip held fast, in all his work for Christ, to the infinite worth, in the eyes of Christ, of *one*. We must never forget that in a busy city. Where God is, we are not lost in any crowd. We are separately precious and separately sought. In the love of Jesus we all stand alone. One by one we are found, and led, and humbled, till the day break and the shadows flee away.

AGAIN, observe that *the earnest do not despair when disappointed*. There is something very noble in this courtier. There is a touch of true greatness in the man. In a heathen court, and with everything against him, his life had grown into a great cry for God. Somehow, he had got his hands on the Old Testament. Never a Jewish trader came to Meroë but the chancellor had earnest converse with him. Until at last nothing would ease his heart but the resolve to journey to Jerusalem. The Temple was there, and the priests and scribes were there—would he not learn all that he craved for, there? And now he is returning homeward, a weary, baffled, disappointed man. He had craved for bread, they had given him a stone. He had cried, like Luther when he first saw Rome, ‘Hail, Holy City’; and the holy city had brought no solace to him. How many a man, in such a disappointment, would have cast his Scripture to the winds of heaven? But the eunuch was of another mould than that. His was too great a heart to nurse despair. He must still seek, he must still read, he must still study. He was deep in Isaiah on that desert road. And it was in that hour, when his journey seemed so useless, and his hope was quenched and his heart was sick and weary—it was *then* that he stepped into the light of Christ. We must remember there are disappoint-

ments in all seeking. There come times when we all seem baffled in our quest. We are tempted to ask, What is the use of it? Is it worth while? Had we not better give in? We are often brought to the point of losing heart. In such moods recall the Ethiopian. He would still hold to it spite of all failure. And on the day when everything seemed vain, the footsteps of the dawn were on the hills.

THEN lastly, *God is behind many a chance meeting*. I think that the driver of this Nubian chariot was not a little startled to see Philip; it was an unlikely place to light on any traveller. And when he got home to the stables of his master, and told the story by the fire of a night, all would agree that this accidental meeting had been one of the strange chances of the road. But *we* know that the meeting was not that. The hand of God had ordered and prepared it. It had been arranged for in the plans of heaven, though it seemed an accident to the dusky charioteer. We must believe that it is often so. Our friendships and comradeships do not begin haphazard. We seem to be thrown across each other's path, but the hand of God has been ordering the way. Two people meet—we call the meeting chance. But life will be different evermore for both. It were well to strike out *chance* from our vocabulary, and in its place to put the will of God.

FORTY-FIFTH SUNDAY

Morning

HAMAN'S OVERTHROW

Passages to be read : Esther vii. 1-10 ; viii. 1-17.

WHEN the second day's banquet was spread, and the king and Haman were reclining at it with Esther, the king for the third time begged Esther to tell him the request she wished to proffer. It was a moment of supreme importance for Esther. The lives of thousands were hanging in the balance. The hour of opportunity was come ; if it was not used, everything was lost. So Esther declared her nationality ; and she reminded the king of the approaching massacre. Haman doubtless had urged it most plausibly once ; it looked very different as told by Esther. So different that the King did not recognise it, and demanded in passion who was the author of this. Then Esther pointed to Haman at the table, and in an instant it all flashed back on Xerxes. He remembered the mandate he had so rashly signed, probably in an hour of drunken recklessness. And he rose from the feast, and went out to the garden (how differently from another King who did that !) tortured with the remembrance of his folly, and of the craft that had taken him unawares. Esther and Haman were now left alone, and Haman knew he had only one chance of life. He flung himself down at Esther's feet, as she lay reclining on her pillows at the table, and begged her passionately to have mercy on him. Just then the king came in ; he pretended to misinterpret

Haman's action; he cried in a fury that Haman was disgracing him—and every one knew that Haman's doom was sealed. They covered his face; he would never look on royalty any more. And on the gallows that had been reared for Mordecai, Haman paid the penalty for his crimes.

BUT though Haman was punished, the royal decree still stood; and when the day came, the Jews would still be massacred. Esther had been signally successful so far; but her work for her nation was not accomplished yet. Emboldened by her victory, she approached her lord again, urging him to countermand the sad decree. But what could be done? Xerxes himself was powerless. The word of a Persian king once passed, was passed for ever. Darius had been helpless to effect the release of Daniel, and now Xerxes was as impotent as he. It was then that a device suggested itself. There are few laws that cannot be somehow evaded. Let Mordecai be made grand-vizier, with full powers; could he not possibly devise some counter-movement? The king's word could not be broken, that was clear; but its execution might have unlooked-for issues. So once again the couriers went galloping. The clatter of hoofs was heard in the still night, and wakened the sleepers in many a lonely hamlet. Riders, covered with dust and spent with travel, spurred into distant market-places as the sun was setting. In an incredibly short space of time there was not a Jewish colony in the kingdom but had got news of how the tide had turned. They were not to let themselves be massacred like sheep. They were to gird on their armour and defend themselves. The moment that a blow was struck at them, they were to combine and strike a counter-blow. That was the tenor of the royal mandate. But I have no doubt that the couriers eked it out. They told how Haman was hanged and Esther honoured. They hinted that no one would be very angry, if they went a little beyond the written word. And how the

Jews interpreted their liberty, and how they used 'the wild justice of revenge,' and how they filled the land with deeds of bloodshed that it makes us shudder to remember, all that will be found in the chapters that follow our passage of to-day.

NOW the first thing to strike us in our lesson is the truth of the proverb *that curses come home to roost*. There is a dramatic vividness in the story of Haman's gallows, that a boy will remember all his days. It was built in one of the yards of Haman's house, and you may be sure it would not rise so noiselessly and swiftly as the gallows in Edinburgh that seemed to rise so magically, when Sir Walter Scott was a schoolboy there. It was built for Mordecai, and for him alone; and every blow of the carpenter's hammer on it would be a sweet sound to bitter-hearted Haman. But just as the man who invented the French guillotine was executed on the guillotine himself, so on the gallows that Haman reared for Mordecai, Haman himself was the unhappy sufferer. Be sure of it that in ways we cannot see, the evil we do will come back upon ourselves. The weapons of sin are not so much like arrows, they are rather like Australian boomerangs. Others must suffer whenever we do wrong, and that alone should make us hate all wrong-doing; but in a weakened will, and in debased affections, in a coarser manhood, and in a loveless and lightless future, we shall yet be the great sufferers ourselves.

ANOTHER proverb well illustrated here is *that the darkest hour is that before the dawn*. We have seen what a pitiable plight the Jews were in. We have heard their cry when the mandate of Xerxes reached them. Exile was sore, but now their case was terrible. Their outlook had never been darker than this hour. Yet it was *then*, in the darkness as of midnight, that the second message from the palace reached them. And the writer is at pains to

let us see the exultant joy and gladness that they felt. How dark all was to Joseph in the prison, yet the sun was just then on the point of breaking! How dark all was to Jesus on the cross, yet the cross was the very threshold of the glory! All through the Bible, God (who knows our hearts) has a message for us when the worst comes to the worst. He enforces on us, by a score of instances, that morning is nearer midnight than we thought.

THEN, lastly, *there is something nobler than revenge.* After the murder of Rizzio, an old historian tells us, Queen Mary said, 'No more tears—I will think on a revenge.' And that, too, was the spirit of the Jews, when the news came of the change in their affairs. But after the Indian Mutiny, with all its horrors, do you know the revenge that Lord Shaftesbury took? He founded the Christian Literature Society, to spread the knowledge of Jesus throughout India. Shall we not try to live in that same spirit? Jesus has come, and revenge is banished now. We serve One who taught us something nobler, when He said, 'Father, forgive them, they know not what they do.'

FORTY-FIFTH SUNDAY

Evening

ÆNEAS AND DORCAS

Passage to be read : Acts ix. 32-43.

WHEN the fierce fires of persecution had died out, Peter set forth on a tour of visitation. He was eager to find how the churches had been faring; Jesus was whispering to him, 'Feed My Lambs.' He went from town to town and village to village, comfort-

ing, cheering, and inspiring; and it was in this tour that Jesus led him to the bedside of the palsied disciple in Lydda. Lydda was some thirty miles from Jerusalem, on the high road from the capital to the coast. It is a little town that has had a strange and chequered history; its story is full of sieges and assault. Tradition tells us that St. George was born there—*our* St. George, who fought with the dragon; but it is not through St. George, it is through St. Peter, that the name is so familiar to our ears. Æneas, then, lived in Lydda, and Peter found him there (v. 33)—*found* him, I take it, because he was looking for him. It is the things we look for that we are quick to see, and Peter had won the eyes of Jesus now. If a Jewish merchant had come down to Lydda, he would have discovered much, but never Æneas. It took a Christian missionary, filled with love, to find this sick-bed and show it to the world. What do *you* find when you go to a strange place? What do *you* see when you travel in foreign countries? Is it only the mountains, and the waterfalls, and castles, and the dresses so different from those at home? A Christ-touched spirit will see far more than that—it will see the need of saving and of healing. The man of science finds new species of plants; the explorer finds strange customs and observances; but the apostle finds a certain man who has been eight years bed-ridden with the palsy. The boys who read Homer or Virgil have heard of another Æneas. He was the hero and the champion of Troy. And once, when *that* Æneas had been wounded, he was healed by the intervention of the gods. All that is fable; but *this* story is no fable. Peter said to Æneas, 'Jesus Christ maketh thee whole.' And his palsy left him that very hour, and he arose immediately.

A FEW miles from Lydda lay the town of Joppa, and Joppa was the seaport of Jerusalem. Those who have read Charles Kingsley's *Heroes*, and who re-

member how Perseus rescued Andromeda, will be interested in knowing that the old world believed that it was at Joppa that Andromeda was chained. It was here that the materials were landed which were used in the building of the Temple. And it was from the port of Joppa that Jonah sailed, when he thought to fly from the presence of the Lord. Here, then, lived Tabitha, and Tabitha means *gazelle*. The gazelle was one type of beauty for the Jew. And whether Tabitha was beautiful in face or not, we all know that she was beautiful in character. Probably she had been a fine sewer as a girl; but in her girlish days it would be fancy work. The fancy work never became real work till the pity of Jesus touched her womanly heart. She was not a speaker; she never addressed meetings. I dare say she envied the ladies who could speak. But she learned that there was a service quite as good as that, and that was the service of a consecrated needle. In the glimpse which our verses give of Tabitha, we see how deeply and sincerely she was mourned. And we can picture the joy of many a home in Joppa when the news came that Tabitha lived again. The tidings travelled through all the town, we read, and many believed in the Lord. And then our passage closes with telling us that Peter lived for a long time with the tanner Simon. Do you know why the Bible tells us Simon's occupation? It is because the Jews thought tanning disgraceful work. No rigid and formal and self-respecting Jew would ever have demeaned himself by lodging *there*. And the narrative wished to show us Peter's mind, and how he was rising above Jewish prejudice, and how he was getting ready for the vision that we shall have to consider in our next lesson.

NOW let us note the close resemblances between the raising of Tabitha and the raising of Jairus' daughter. Peter had never forgotten that memorable hour, and *now* he could not follow his Lord too closely.

Peter had been boastful and self-willed and impetuous once; he had loved to suggest and dictate and take the lead. But *now*, with all the past graven on his heart, his passion is to follow in Jesus' steps. Had Jesus put all the mourners from the room? Then Peter must be alone with Tabitha. Had Jesus said *Talitha cumi*? Then Peter will say *Tabitha cumi*. Had Jesus taken the maiden by the hand, and given her back again to her rejoicing friends? Then Peter will present Tabitha alive. The one point of difference that I find is this: our verses tell us that Peter knelt down and *prayed*. In that one clause there lies the difference between the work of Jesus and that of His disciple. For the power of Peter was delegated power. It was Christ who was working, and to Christ he must cry. But Jesus was acting in His inherent sovereignty. In His own right He was Lord of life and death.

THREE minor lessons shine out from these incidents.

(1) *We may witness for Christ even in making a bed.* The first sign of power demanded of Æneas was that he should arise and make his bed. Now the words may not quite mean what we understand by them. *His* bed was a carpet, and had to be stowed away. But they *do* mean that in a little act like that—the rolling up and disposing of a rug—a man may show that Christ has dealt with him. You remember the servant girl who was asked by Mr. Spurgeon what evidence she had to show that she was a Christian; and she replied that she always swept under the mats now. I dare say she never thought about Æneas; but the two arguments for Christ are close akin.

(2) *The sight of a man may be better than a sermon.* 'All that dwelt in Lydda *saw* him, and turned to the Lord.' And (3) *We must help with our hand as well as with our prayer.* When Peter was left alone beside dead Tabitha, we read that he knelt down and *prayed*. Had he not prayed, he had not wrought the miracle. But when

Tabitha sat up, wrapped in her strange garments, that hampered her limbs and made it hard to move, then Peter gave her his *hand* and lifted her up. I wonder if he remembered how Jesus had said, 'Simon, Simon, I have *prayed* for thee,' and then, on that wild night upon the loch, had put forth His *hand* and held him up? The heart and hand of Jesus had saved Peter. The heart and hand of Peter won back Dorcas. And it takes both the heart that prays, and the hand that helps, to bring the kingdom even a little nearer.

FORTY-SIXTH SUNDAY

Morning

JEREMIAH IN A DUNGEON

Passage to be read : Jer. xxxviii. 1-20.

IN the preceding chapter we read of Jeremiah's arrest, and now we have his subsequent maltreatment. Jerusalem was still besieged by the Chaldeans. Their forces had gathered again around the city. We have to picture the army of the East lying in close blockade around the walls ; and *within* the walls one man, and one man only, counselling surrender in the name of God. You can hardly wonder that that man was called a traitor. I think that *we* should have called him that too, had we been there. John Knox was called a traitor often, when he urged on an alliance with the old enemy England. It was very hard for the patriotic princes in Jerusalem to be rousing the city to desperate resistance, and all the time, moving about the streets, was this wild prophet preaching capitulation. Had they not caught him once, just in the nick of time, when he was creeping out to join the enemy ? We know what passions were excited not so long ago when it was whispered that so and so was a pro-Boer. We can gather then how Jerusalem would feel when it learned that Jeremiah was a pro-Chaldean. At last the princes could stand it no longer. It was expedient that one man should die for the city. So four of the stoutest of them went to the king, and pled with him for the death of Jeremiah.

NOW King Zedekiah believed in Jeremiah. He recognised that his message was from God. But Zedekiah was a poor weak creature, quite unworthy to sit on any throne. Milton says somewhere, in his *Paradise Lost*, 'To be weak is miserable, doing or suffering,' and we have only to read this chapter attentively to see the weak misery of Zedekiah. He believed in Jeremiah, yet he would not stand up for him. He yielded up Jeremiah to the princes. No doubt they had meant to kill the prophet outright. Perhaps they had appointed the assassin. But now that he stood before them, strong in the Lord, and with his face shining, although he wist it not, they all shrank from the thought of instant murder. Was there no way of silencing their consciences? Was it not possible that the prophet might *disappear*? It was then, I think, that Malchiah, the son of Hammelech, came to their aid with a very sweet suggestion. In his court there was a pit or cistern, like the well in the courtyard of the castle of St. Andrews. The water had dried up during the long siege, but at the bottom of it, to the depth of three or four feet, there was black ooze and mud. Suppose Jeremiah were lowered into that miry clay, would the city ever hear of him again? So they let Jeremiah down with cords, we read, and Jeremiah sunk in the mire (v. 6).

BUT one thing these princes had forgotten — the cistern was not far distant from the royal palace. The cries of the prisoner, on their way to God, rang in the ears of Zedekiah's servants. And one of them, Ebed-Melech, could not stand it. He was an Ethiopian, like the servant of Queen Candace. He went to the king and found him sitting in judgment, and told him what had been done to Jeremiah. A wave of remorse swept over Zedekiah. He went to extremes, as the weakest often do. *Before*, he would not lift a finger for the prophet, but *now* he will have thirty men go save

him. So Jeremiah is lifted from the pit, half dead, but with a heart undaunted still. And the passage closes with a glimpse of this noble prophet reiterating his old message from the Lord.

THIS scene at once recalls two other scenes. The first is the familiar story of Joseph. He too was cast into a miry cistern; he too was drawn out again before his life had fled, through the mingled passions of pity and remorse. But far more vividly, if not so literally, the scene suggests the last sufferings of Jesus. In the lonely heroism of *this* man of sorrows we see outlined the heroic loneliness of Jesus. Both stood alone, in the city that they loved, hated by the very hearts they longed to help. Both would have saved the city from its enemies, if the city had only hearkened to their voice. And then in Zedekiah have we no gleams of Pilate? Do we not feel the likeness of the two? Both saw, more truly than the people saw, the grandeur of the man who was accused. Both pleaded helplessness and knew to the full that 'to be weak is miserable, doing or suffering.' Both wavered and vacillated and were inconsistent, and both were crushed and ruined by their sin.

NOW note these secondary lessons in this chapter. Firstly, *how mistaken we may be about our true welfare*. The charge that was laid against Jeremiah was this, that he sought not the welfare of the people (v. 4). Every one thought Jeremiah was bent on harm; they regarded him as a foe and not a friend; yet *now*, looking back on a completed history, we see that the leaders of Judah were mistaken. Are there not times when we all mistake God so? Is it not hard to believe He seeks our good? Are we not tempted to see things by the eye of sense, and to rebel at the unwelcome way? In such hours it is well for us to remember how it fared with Judah in despising Jeremiah. Next mark *in what*

unlikely quarters friends are found. Who would have dreamed of help from Ebed-Melech? Yet when the king would do nothing, and all his court was hostile, the Ethiopian eunuch proved a friend. Can we give other instances from Scripture? I think that Joseph of Arimathæa is one. And the Pharisee Gamaliel, the doctor of the law, who spake up for the apostles, is another. But perhaps when one comes to understand what *sin* is, and how utterly hateful sin must be to God, the most wonderful instance of unlikely friendship is that which is offered by our Saviour Christ. Lastly, observe *the thoughtfulness of true compassion.* Ebed-Melech's heart was on fire to rescue the prophet. How tempted he must have been to do it instantly! Instead of that he goes to the royal lumber-room, to gather a great bundle of the rags stored there. He thought how emaciated the prophet must be. He thought how the cords would lacerate his flesh. Ebed-Melech was overflowing with pity; but his pity was overflowing with kindly thought. Let every one of us remember that. To be truly kind we must be truly thoughtful. When the psalmist wishes to speak of *God's* compassion, he says, 'The Lord *thinketh* upon me.'

FORTY-SIXTH SUNDAY

Evening

PETER AND THE ANGEL

Passage to be read : Acts xii. 1-23.

AT the time when Christianity was spreading, and getting its first welcome in the pagan world, Herod Agrippa I., grandson of Herod the Great, began to persecute the disciples in Jerusalem. James,

one of the three whom Jesus had drawn closest to Him, was sent to be with Christ (which is far better); and then, to conciliate the Jews, who were mightily annoyed at Peter's traffic with the Gentiles, Herod had an arrest laid upon Peter also. Now Peter had broken prison before. It would never do that that should happen again. Sixteen soldiers were thereupon told off to watch him, between two of whom (taken in turn) Peter was chained. Everything looked very black for Peter then. His execution after Easter seemed inevitable. The king was against him, and the guard of soldiers, and the thick walls and bolted gates of the prison. What could a little band of well-wishers effect in the teeth of great worldly powers like these? Had they been faithless, they would have taken to *plotting*; but being faithful, they took to *praying* instead. We can often accomplish a great deal more by prayer than by all the plots and plans that seem so clever. For on the night before his execution Peter was sleeping, and dreaming perhaps of heaven in the morning, when suddenly the ward was filled with light, and Peter stood up to find himself at liberty. The angel of the Lord had come to him; it all seemed like a dream to Peter. They passed out under the open sky, and after going through one street, the angel left him. And then the passage closes in the house of Mary, and I am sure that no one in that house of Mary would ever doubt the power of prayer again.

FIRST note, then, that *there is no squandering of divine power in any miracle*. When Peter rose up his chains fell from his hands. It took the power of heaven to do that. And as he passed from the first ward to the second, and through the iron gate into the street, the way was opened by divine assistance. Peter was powerless to achieve his liberty, and God did what Peter *could not do*. Still, there were many things that Peter *could* do, and heaven did not interfere in these. He had to gird him-

self and bind on his own sandals, and cast his garment about him, and step out. God was ready to do His proper work, but nobody but Peter must do Peter's. Now, the point I want the reader to observe is the economy of power in Bible miracles. That is one mark of the authentic miracle, in contrast with the cheap marvels of a corrupted Church. At Cana, Jesus used the water-pots, and called on the servants who were standing there. In raising Lazarus the stone had to be rolled away, but no word of Jesus made the stone remove. At the feeding of the thousands on the hill-side, the provisions of the young lad were taken, and the food was distributed by human hands. No one could have supplied the wine but Jesus; no one else could have brought Lazarus to life; no one could have fed the famished thousands—if these things are to be done, Jesus must do them. But there, as here, there is much that man can do. There are helping touches that human powers may give. And in the very heart of every miracle, where the divine power is most signally in exercise, we find that these human powers are employed. That is the spiritual side of the old proverb, that God helps those who help themselves.

NEXT, note that *the angels depart whenever their work is done*. The angel led Peter out of the prison ward; he was too dazed to grope his way in the dark corridors. And then they passed on through one street together, under the first flushings of the Easter sunrise. Meanwhile the chill air was striking on Peter; he was coming to himself in the still street. He heard his own footfall echoing in the stillness; he recognised this house and that. It took the swift walk through one street to do it—*swift*, for I don't think that angels ever lag. But by the time one street was traversed, Peter was cooled and steadied, and forthwith the angel departed from him (v. 10). Now, sometimes the angels leave us, for our *sin*. It would stain the whiteness of their wings to walk with

us. We live so meanly, and have such unworthy thoughts, that we are not fit company for angels. But there is another doctrine of the departing angel. They leave us as they left Peter, for our *good*. It would be very sweet to walk beside an angel. We should be certain never to take wrong turnings. We should move on through all the streets of life with never a tremor, under that angel guidance. But then—why has God given us our faculties? And what is our reason for, and what our will? You may depend upon it these would never waken, nor grow into their strong and godlike fulness, if the white wings were always on ahead. If manhood is to come, childhood must go. There is no liberty where the angel is. It is where the spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty. So we all pass out of that angel street, to think ourselves alone in the chill morning. But we are not alone, for God is with us; and we shall reach the door we are seeking, as did Peter.

LAST, note that *even our gladness may become a hindrance*. When Samuel heard the voice of God in the sanctuary, he got up in the morning and opened the Temple doors. But when Rhoda heard the voice of Peter, she left the door shut in Peter's face. Was she afraid to open at that hour? Like the sister in *Comus*, she was too innocent to fear. She opened not the door *for gladness*. It was her joy that kept her from her duty. Joy, then, may sometimes hinder duty. Do we ever read of joy hindering *faith*? When the disciples were gathered together within closed doors, and suddenly the risen Jesus stood in their midst, Luke tells us that they believed not for joy (xxiv. 41-45). Now, joy is a serious and holy thing. Christ wants us all to be sharers in His joy. But remember there is a joy that sometimes hinders duty, and there is a joy that sometimes hinders faith. May not that be the reason why in our spiritual life God sometimes has to take our joy away? It is so supremely

essential that we do our duty ; it is so imperative that we believe. Perhaps some mother, glancing at this page, thinks of the child she used to call 'my joy.' It may be a little plainer to her now why the flower was transplanted to the brighter garden.

FORTY-SEVENTH SUNDAY

Morning

JERUSALEM TAKEN

Passage to be read: Jer. xxxix. 1-18.

THE siege of Jerusalem had now lasted, with one respite, for about eighteen months. The courage of the besieged was still unbroken; there was no word yet of yielding up the city. These children of Abraham were unrivalled in resistance, and they have much to teach us when *we* have to resist. But there was an enemy in their midst more terrible than the Chaldeans. It was the pang and the gnawing of increasing hunger. Day after day saw the provisions grow scarce, and the citizens reduced to greater straits. We have heard most harrowing stories from India of the sufferings caused there by famine. No one who has listened to a missionary from the famine-areas can forget the pictures of destitution that he drew. Well, when we read the book of Lamentations we see such scenes in the highways of Jerusalem. Gaunt men were there, and famished women and children; deeds of unutterable horror were done. And how could starving men defend the ramparts? There was no strength in the bravest of them, to endure. The Chaldeans, like the tide of a great sea, swept in through a breach they had made in the north wall. The doom was fulfilled and Jerusalem was taken. Then followed a period of pillaging. The streets of the holy city ran with blood. The houses were burned, the Temple on Zion was sacked, the sacred vessels were

carried off by the conquerors. The remnant of the people were marched away into a life of exile in Chaldea.

AND what of King Zedekiah all this time? Our chapter lifts the curtain on that tragedy. It was the hour of midnight when the city was taken, and Zedekiah was in his palace. He would hear, far off, the tumult of the onset; the cry would grow louder and louder through the streets. A dishevelled messenger, panting for breath, would burst into the royal presence with the news. The only hope of King Zedekiah lay in flight. And so our chapter tells us that under cover of night Zedekiah and his family and bodyguard fled. They stole through the park, passed through the southern postern, hurried down by the rough hollow of Kedron, making for Jericho. If they could only cross the Jordan before sunrise, who knew but they might balk the Chaldeans yet? But some one betrayed them—the weak are badly served. They were intercepted before they gained the river. And when the morning rose in the splendour of the East, and touched the quiet hills with golden mystery, it looked on Zedekiah and his sons and the flower of his faithful bodyguard marching as prisoners, to learn their doom from Nebuchadrezzar at Riblah. And what a doom it was! The sons of the king were killed before his eyes, and it was the last sight that the king saw on earth. Zedekiah was blinded, and loaded with chains, and carried away to Babylon, and there he remained in prison till he died. There is a Jewish tradition that he was set to work in a mill. The king, in chains, toiled with the common slave. If so, let us remember the dark lot of Samson, and read the glorious lines of Milton on it:—

‘Ask for this great deliverer now, and find him
Eyeless in Gaza in the mill with slaves.
Yet stay, let me not rashly call in doubt
Divine prediction; what if all foretold
Had been fulfilled but through my own default.’

BUT it is an ill wind that blows nobody good, and the sack of Jerusalem strangely blessed the poor. Perhaps in the bosom of every judgment of heaven there lies an unexpected joy for somebody. The very poor were not carried off to Babylon. Here at any rate blessed were the poor. They received gifts of fields and grants of vineyards from Nebuchadrezzar's captain who had been left in charge. Note, too, that Jeremiah was not made prisoner. Our chapter dwells in some detail on that. The Chaldeans had learned the burden of his prophecy, and they regarded the prophet as their friend. Word came to the city that he should be set at liberty. He was committed to the charge of a staunch and godly home. Perhaps Nebuchadrezzar thought the prophet would exult in the fulfilment of the doom that he had heralded. But it is one thing to be a messenger of sorrow and another to rejoice when sorrow comes. A prophet may be constrained of heaven to speak, yet suffer an agony when the speech proves true. It is never the man whose lips have been touched by God who can find pleasure in saying, 'I told you so.' So Jeremiah was not exultant now. His heart was desolate in a desolate city. He is pictured as sitting in the forsaken streets, or in the cave near the Damascus gate that still bears his name. It is now, if ever, that we find him in the 'attitude of hopeless sorrow' that is attributed to him by Michael Angelo.

NOW note these simple lessons in the chapter. And firstly, *good intentions are not enough to save us*. If ever there was a man of good intentions, I think that King Zedekiah was that man. He was not a monarch who sinned with a high hand; his heart was in the right place, as we say. He meant well, when he resisted Babylonia. He meant well, when he rescued Jeremiah. Yet for all his well-meaning, here is his end—darkness

and worse than death in Chaldea. Mark, then, that we may have the best intentions, and still be castaway. Our hearts may respond to what is bright and good, and life may be a failure after all. From Zedekiah we should learn that courage is needed, and trust in God in the teeth of all appearance, if our path is to move into the perfect day. Next, *our weakness is certain to make others suffer*. I am sure that Zedekiah was proud of his body-guard. It was a very gallant and devoted band. And I am certain that he loved his sons. He would have fought to the death for them very gladly. He never wished them ill—perish the thought: but he was *weak*, and that cost them all their lives. And is not that the worst of weakness always? It involves in suffering our dearest and our best. For none of us can be untrue to God, nor can we halt or hesitate in our obedience, nor can we hearken to the baser voices, nor play the coward when the trumpet calls, but life will be made harder for our friend, and shadows will fall on lives we dearly love, and others will suffer because we are weak. Lastly, *we are doing God's will when we little dream of it*. Do you think that when the Chaldeans took the city, they knew that Jehovah had foretold that doom? Do you think that they set themselves to work that judgment, because they felt it was the will of God? Chaldea had its own hopes and ends and purposes of vengeance; but behind all, *we trace the Sovereign Will*. Let us try to realise that in our lives. God is behind us when we dream not of it. We plan and toil, we prosper and we fail, but underneath are the everlasting arms. The Sovereign Will is working to its goal.

FORTY-SEVENTH SUNDAY

Evening

THE STONING OF PAUL

Passage to be read : Acts xiv. 1-20.

DRIVEN from Antioch by the outbreak of persecution, Paul and Barnabas moved on to Iconium. There was a distance of some ninety miles between the two towns, and now they might reasonably hope to be at peace. Iconium was a fine strategic point. The Roman roads between east and west ran through it. Many a morning Paul would be wakened from sleep by the noise of some caravan under his window, as it rolled westward with its eastern merchandise. And again it would be the tramp of Roman legions as they marched eastward along the military way. All this would set the heart of Paul a-throbbing. Might not his word reach to the end of the world from Iconium? Paul might have settled at Iconium for years if God had not said to him, 'This is not your rest.' That is one purpose which persecution serves. It is God's way of bidding His soldiers march. Jesus was thinking of far more than personal safety when He bade His disciples flee from city to city (Matt. x. 23). Just as the gale beats on the falling rain, and drives it away till it falls on distant fields, so persecution, striking on the Gospel, carries it to unexpected spots. Paul and Barnabas had to fly from Iconium. It was the Jews who stirred up trouble again. The apostles were learning, in a very bitter way, how a man's foes are they of his own household. There is no foe so dangerous or so relentless as an old friend who has turned dead against us.

ABOUT forty miles from Iconium lies Lystra, in the wild and dreary plain of Lycaonia. Lycaonia means the Land of Wolves, and we can picture the desolate region by the name. I think that when Paul crossed the marches of that wolf-land he would remember the saying of his Master, 'Behold I send you forth as sheep in the midst of *wolves*, be ye therefore wise as serpents and harmless as doves' (Matt. x. 16). To Lystra, then, Paul and Barnabas fled, and there they preached. And at Lystra, by the power of Jesus, Paul healed the cripple. You could tell that the writer (Luke) had been a doctor by the fond minuteness with which he describes the disease. Most writers would just have said that the man was lame. But the physician made a much fuller diagnosis. The man was impotent in both his feet; he had been so from birth; he had never walked. Do you see how all the training we have had can be used in the long run towards glorifying God? Luke never thought of that when he was studying medicine; but the miracle is doubly vivid just because he studied. So every interest we ever had, and every pursuit we were ever zealous over, and every hobby that once fascinated us, no matter how childish or slight it may have been—all these, when we are Christ's, shall prove of service. It is the vessel full of water that becomes wine.

NOW there was a legend very well known in Lystra, for the scene of it was that very region—it was the legend of Baucis and Philemon. The Lystran children used to gather around their mothers, and beg for the story of Baucis and Philemon. Baucis and Philemon were two humble cottagers to whom Jupiter and Mercury had come disguised. The gods had knocked in vain at every other door, but these two lowly souls gave them a welcome. It is a sweet story, exquisitely told by Ovid; it was devoutly believed in in the homes of Lystra. Many a mother would call her son Philemon, with the

prayer that Jupiter might come again. Who, then, were these two strangers in the town who had healed the lame man in such a marvellous way? Was not one of them august and kingly, and the other all life and activity and eloquence? It ran like wildfire through the market-place that here were Jupiter and Mercury returned. Paul did not understand what all the stir was. The excited people fell back on their own dialect. He felt as helpless as a Londoner would feel in the middle of a crowd all speaking Gaelic. But when a solemn procession halted before his lodging, and he saw the oxen with garlands on their heads, it flashed on him in a moment what was happening, and he and Barnabas sprang out to stop the blasphemy. Had it been *Jews* whom Paul was called to speak to, you would have had plenty of texts from the Old Testament. Had the crowd been an *Athenian* crowd, there would have been swift appeals to history and art. It shows the infinite tact of the apostle that with these rude folk he argued from the rain (v. 17). It was a sore disappointment to excited Lystra; the current of feeling very swiftly changed. We are not surprised a few days later to find Paul stoned and left for dead.

NOW note, first, *the keen eyesight of a saint* (v. 9). Paul saw in a twinkling that the cripple had faith. There was something in the face of this poor sufferer that told the apostle that true faith was there. Our Saviour was always on the outlook for faith, and Paul had caught this secret from the Master. There is nothing like love and fellowship with Christ for revealing the best points in a poor beggar's face. Next note, *there is a meaning even in a rain-drop* (v. 17), it had often spoken to Paul of the Creator. And, lastly, mark (we cannot learn it too young) that *to-day's sacrifice may be to-morrow's stoning*. One day, with Jesus, it was 'Hosanna'; a little afterwards, 'Crucify Him, Crucify Him.' And one day, with Paul, it was, 'He is a god'; a little afterwards, 'Stone

him and cast him out.' Now I want no one to become cynical. The world is a kindly and happy and pleasant place. We are amazed, as we struggle on through manhood, at the loyalty and love that ring us round. All that I want my readers to do is to set their affections on things which are above; not to rate very highly human praise; not to be greatly depressed by human censure. Had Paul been desperately anxious to *please* Lystra, I fancy that that stoning would have killed him.

FORTY-EIGHTH SUNDAY

Morning

DANIEL AND HIS COMPANIONS

Passage to be read: Dan. i. 1-21.

THE childhood of Daniel, like the childhood of a greater than Daniel, is not dwelt upon in Scripture. It is when the peaceful monotony of home is exchanged for the sharp conflicts of the world that we first make acquaintance with the prophet. In verse *four* Daniel is referred to as a child. That is our only hint as to his age. But even that conveys no very definite information, for the word child is broadly used in the Old Testament. We know that when Joseph (whom Daniel so much resembles) was over seventeen years of age, he was still a child (Gen. xlii. 22). Daniel, then, may have been a lad of a like age when the calamity came that was to be his glory. He would thus have been born in the days of good king Josiah, perhaps in the very year of Josiah's reformation. He would grow up breathing the new air, and learning the new reverence for the Word. He would be taught from his earliest days to hate idolatry. He would have Jeremiah as one of his boyish heroes. In such ways Daniel would be prepared for the sore testings of his after years; in the quiet periods of a godly childhood, he was getting ready for the fires of Babylon. In the long and unrecorded days at Nazareth, Jesus was preparing for His ministry. Through quiet communion with nature and with God, His childhood was making ready for the cross.

So Daniel, taught in the reformation doctrines, and fired from his childhood with the new zeal for God, was being strengthened (although he knew it not) for the reproach of Christ that was hidden in the future.

WHEN Daniel, then, was some seventeen years of age, news reached Jerusalem which profoundly moved the city. The king of Babylon was marching westward, bent on extending his empire by the sword. At Carchemish a great battle was fought with Egypt. The forces of Egypt were utterly defeated. There is a glowing song of triumph in Jeremiah at the downfall of the oppressor Egypt (Jer. xlvi.). Then Nebuchadnezzar marched on Jerusalem. The city was besieged and captured. And when the caravans rolled back to Babylon, heavy with the spoil of the campaign, they carried, at the king of Babylon's command, some of the cleverest and brightest youths of Judah. Among these were Daniel and his three companions. We can picture what breaking hearts they had when they were torn from everything they loved. But I would ask the boys to notice this particularly, that Daniel and his comrades were youths of exceptional gifts; and that if it had not been for the unusual promise they showed, they would never have been chosen for Babylon at all. It is the *clever* boy who should 'Dare to be a Daniel.' It is the boy who is generally dux, and who carries off the prizes and the medals. We sometimes imagine that if a boy is brilliant, we must not expect him to be very good; but Daniel was both, and what he was, you may be.

BUT Daniel was not doomed to a mean slavery. The king of Babylon had worthier plans for him. He purposed to make Daniel a courtier, in the best sense of that mismanaged word. So for three years Daniel was to be taught, in the schools for which Babylon was

famous; and he and his friends were to have their food sent to them from the table of Nebuchadnezzar himself. Now the luxury of wealthy Babylon was notorious. It was very different from the table of Daniel's childhood. Daniel felt from the first the perils of this new life, and begged to be fed on pulse and water only. The steward hesitated—would his charges thrive? It was agreed to make trial of it for ten days. And such was the result of the experiment, that the wine and meat were finally withdrawn. Daniel and his three comrades did not starve. They grew fairer and fatter through their temperate living. Better still, their minds grew clearer and more acute; they made amazing progress in their studies. So much so, that when the examination came, and the king tested them on the progress they had made, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and astrologers who were in all his realm (v. 20).

NOTE these three lessons in this opening chapter. Firstly, *unusual gifts may bring unusual perils*. Had Daniel and his friends been undistinguished, they had never been carried into exile at Babylon. They would have escaped the persecutions there, had they been average and ordinary boys. It was because they were distinguished they were chosen; and it was because they were chosen that they suffered. Their higher gifts brought them to sorer dangers, and deepened their need of a protecting God. Next, *we are sometimes led by ways we would never have chosen*. Daniel saw that as he reviewed his past. It seemed as if all his life had broken down when he was carried off into a pagan land. Had he had the choosing of his *own* career, he would never have shaped it on a course like that. Yet *that* was the road to his life's work and his glory, as the road for Joseph lay towards the land of Egypt. Then, lastly, *temperance is true witness-bearing*. Daniel never paraded his religion. He wished, in the ordinary tenor of his

life, to make his protest against the excesses of idolatry. That is the meaning of the pulse and water. It is Daniel making his first stand for God. A day, a meal, a simple act, a word, will show, sometimes, on whose side we are.

FORTY-EIGHTH SUNDAY

Evening

THE GOSPEL IN EUROPE

Passage to be read : Acts xvi. 1-18.

IT was in the second missionary journey of St. Paul that the passage was made to our own coast of Europe. Kings have made the crossing with great armies; peoples have come pushing westward over the sea; but no irruption of Asiatic hordes, and no army bent on a world-conquest, has made such a change upon the life of Europe, as did this traveller of our lesson. I think we all know how Paul found himself at Troas, and how, when there, the vision appeared to him. I think that among all the men mentioned in the Bible, there is none more familiar than this man of Macedonia. And then the voyage, and the visit to Neapolis, and the preaching at the riverside at Philippi—have we not known all that since we knew anything?—there is no page of history that we love more. What little beginnings the mightiest issues have! How insignificant is the start of mighty movements! It is good to think of Western Christendom to-day, with its long record of saintly men and women, with its vast cathedrals and its countless churches, with its hospitals and infirmaries and asylums, with its innumerable charities, with its homes for the aged and the children, all of which owe their existence to the Gospel—it is good to think of that wonderful

and rich life with its thousand activities, that we call the Christian life, and then remember that we can trace it back to these few travellers on the quay at Troas. Do not despise the smallness of beginnings. The fate of a continent may be in one little boat. Behold how great a matter a little fire kindleth.

NOW three truths arrest me in this story. First, *it is only when we obey that visions come.* Scholars have disputed about the 'region of Galatia' (v. 6), whether it is a great territory or a small one. But there is no dispute about a much more important thing, namely, that *two* wills are seen at work right through these verses. On the one hand there is the will of Paul, saying 'I think I should go here; I must go there.' On the other hand there is the will of God, closing this door and that before the apostle. Of course there was no physical force exerted. If Paul had been weak enough to be an obstinate man, he could have got to Asia or to Bithynia nicely. But Paul recognised that the say must lie with heaven, and he yielded himself up in freest self-surrender. He was willing that his own plans should be shattered, and that his schemes and dreams should vanish if God bade, and it was *thus* that he was led to Troas, and it was *then* he had his vision in the night. Now that just means that if we are ever to have visions we must walk along the path of self-surrender. We shall never see the best and brightest things unless (as Jesus says) we are pure in heart. If we are blindly and obstinately set on our own way, the likelihood is that God will let us have it. We shall go away into half-wild Bithynia, and perhaps we shall never be heard of again. But it is when we hold our own plans very lightly, and are ready to yield them up to God, if need be—it is *then* that we reach our Troas, and get our vision of a larger service than we had ever dreamed of.

NEXT, *the vision must be followed by endeavour.* There is one great word in the vocabulary of the Bible that would make an excellent study for our leisure. It is the word *immediately*. There were no laggards among the Bible heroes. Life was a great thing, and time was very precious. When the trumpet sounds, and the call from heaven comes—look in the next verse and you will find *immediately*. So was it here. Paul was asleep when he had his vision at Troas. Self-surrender makes an easy pillow. It was in a dream that the man of Macedonia appeared, crying ‘Come over to Macedonia and help us.’ And I think I see Paul leaping from his couch, in the burning certainty that God had spoken, and sending Luke post-haste down to the harbour to see when the next ship was likely to set sail. ‘Immediately we endeavoured to go into Macedonia.’ The vision must be carried out in action. All effort must be made loyally to fulfil what had come to Paul in the glory of the night. Now what does that mean for us? It just means this. We must interpret our bright gleams in instant duty. All that is highest comes to us in vision, and we must translate it into the common task. When we awaken to God, that is a vision; it is a vision when we first see Jesus as our Saviour. It is in a vision that we first see life’s possibilities, and the way ahead of us, and the cross we shall have to bear. And all life, if we mean to live it well, will be little else than the endeavour to carry out that vision, through the dust and dreariness, and song and sunshine, of the years that are going to be our life.

LASTLY, *the endeavour often seems to contradict the vision.* You note that it was a *man* who appeared to Paul. It was a *man’s* voice that summoned him to Europe. And in the man’s words there was a great appeal; it was as if Macedonia hungered for the Gospel. Yet there is no trace that Neapolis welcomed Paul. And the first convert was a woman, not a man. The first *men*

whom we read of in the story are the angry masters of the poor neurotic girl. I have often wondered if Paul was disappointed. The work was so utterly different from the dream. He had seen in his vision the hands of Macedonia stretched out, and now they were indeed stretched out, but only to lead him to the inner prison at Philippi (v. 24). It was a strange and startling contradiction. A weakling would have been tempted to deny the vision. But Paul was far too faithful to despair, and we see now that God was in it all. So when the vision of Jesus comes to us, and we set out to do some little service for Him, there will not be a task and there will not be a day in which the vision will not be contradicted. Our service may not turn out as we hoped; our prayers may not be answered as we wished; we may get no welcome from those who seemed to call us; we may look for liberty and find a prison-house. But God makes no mistake. The work is His. He can transmute our failures into to-morrow's triumphs. When the dawn of the cloudless morning breaks above us, we shall waken to find He hath done all things well.

FORTY-NINTH SUNDAY

Morning

NEBUCHADNEZZAR'S DREAM

Passages to be read : Dan. ii. 1-9; 19-23; 46-49.

THE training of Daniel was nearly completed when an event occurred which altered all his fortunes. One night, and a forgotten dream during that night, were to change everything for the young exile. Nebuchadnezzar dreamed a dream that troubled him. He started up, awake; but the dream was gone. There only remained with him (as it has often been with us) the haunting sense of something vaguely terrible, the oppressive feeling that in some shadowy guise, figures of calamity and doom had stolen upon him. Now we know how, sometimes, when we forget a *name*, we are worried and irritated till we remember it. That irritation, deepening into anxiety, possessed Nebuchadnezzar over his forgotten dream. He summoned all the ranks of his advisers. It was their study and their passion to interpret dreams. They had schools where little else was taught than that; they had learned treatises dealing with the subject; they had studied the heavens with a noble ardour to discover their bearing upon human destinies. But *now* they were utterly at fault. They had to tell the dream as well as the meaning of it. They protested that such a task as that had never been laid on any man before. But Nebuchadnezzar would brook no excuses. There was a kingly imperiousness about the man. Either they must tell the dream, and be

rewarded ; or confess failure, and be cut to pieces. I think there were more men than Nebuchadnezzar very anxious, as a result of that forgotten dream.

MEANTIME nobody (except God) ever thought of Daniel. If all the professors in the colleges had failed, were things to be righted by this student from the colonies? Daniel might never have heard of the matter at all, if his head had not been imperilled by that failure. It shows the splendid faith of this young alien that he should have trusted God in such an hour. When all the learning of Babylon had failed, and when moon and stars were powerless to answer, Daniel held fast to a prayer-answering God. *Credo quia impossibile*—I believe because it is impossible—said one of the stout old Fathers of the Church ; and the faith of Daniel flamed into noontide glory when all his masters pronounced the thing impossible. Did Daniel go apart and pray *alone*? Not so ; he sent his brother-exiles to their knees. He had been taught (by the angel of the Covenant) that if two of them should agree, it would be done. Then out of the darkness of the night there gleamed on Daniel the vision that had terrified the king. God breathed upon the mist as Daniel slept, and the mist parted, and the dream was there. A weakling would have been full of wild excitement. He would have roused his comrades, and rushed to the royal bed-chamber. But Daniel had the quiet stability that faith gives ; he poured out his heart in gratitude to heaven. The dream was the right one. He had solved the secret. The lad had triumphed where Babylon had failed. And how he was rewarded for his faith, and how his comrades shared in the reward, is told in the closing verses of the chapter.

NOW observe, first, *how human wisdom fails when it is most needed*. We are not to think lightly of that Chaldean wisdom. There was something noble in its

great persistence. A patient and exact and laborious student, who toils among books or stars with infinite relish, is one of the noblest creatures in the world, whether he be a Hittite or a Highlander. Nebuchadnezzar owed much to these Chaldean sages; and the world owes not a little of her progress to them. But in the hour of greatest need that wisdom failed, and in *that* hour help came from trust in God. Sooner or later such seasons come to all. We are brought to the helplessness of these Chaldeans. We think that all we have learned will read the riddle, and all we have learned vanishes like a dream. It is in such hours that one strong cry to God does more for a man than all his college learning. Trust will discover the secret that gives life, when all the training of the schools is impotent. Daniel was a most admirable scholar, yet in the crisis he needed more than that.

NEXT note *how grateful a God-fearing heart is*. The centre and crown of our passages for to-day is the prayer of thanksgiving offered by Daniel. When the vision came, and the secret was revealed, and the flush of triumph fell on this happy student, we find him instantly down at the feet of God, and pouring out his heart in gratitude. There is no better sign of the interior life than a persistent and pervading thankfulness. The greatest saint is not the man who prays most; it is he who is learning to give thanks in everything. It is far easier to pray for what we need than to be really grateful for all that we have got, yet it is only to a grateful heart like Daniel's that visions and voices are going to be vouchsafed. Dare to be a Daniel in *this* sense. Resolve to say good-bye to fret and muttering. Instead of counting up the real and fancied grievances, start a new column and count up the mercies. Daniel was an exile, and he did that. Paul was a prisoner in Rome, and did it. We are in good company when we follow them.

LASTLY, observe *how God exalts men when they look not for it.* Nothing was further from the thought of *Joseph* than that he should ever be a man of power in Egypt. Yet he clung to purity and trusted God, and God exalted him to royal splendour. And nothing was further from the thought of *Daniel* than that to-morrow he should be Governor of Babylon; yet we know how the horn of *Daniel* was exalted. Seekest thou great things for thyself? Seek them not. Do not determine, at all costs, to be *somebody*. Determine, at all costs, to be *God's*, and God will clear the steps, even in Babylon. If we are ambitious, I know not what may happen. I find no promise in Scripture about that. But if we be faithful, says One who ought to know, we shall be ruling the ten cities by and by.

FORTY-NINTH SUNDAY

Evening

PAUL BEFORE HIS JUDGES

Passages to be read: Acts xxiv. 22-27; xxvi. 24-32.

AFTER being five days at Cæsarea, Paul was formally indicted by the Jewish party. The case against him was conducted by Tertullus, who was as unscrupulous as he was eloquent. Felix was no stranger to the matters in debate; he had lived long enough among the Jews to grow conversant with them. He therefore refused to decide the matter off-hand; he would wait till his captain from Jerusalem came down. Now, whether the captain was unwilling to come, or whether he got a broad hint not to hurry, is a question we need not trouble to decide. The fact remains that we have no trace of his visit during Paul's two years of confinement at Cæsarea. What was the apostle doing all

that time? We cannot be certain that he wrote any epistles. Do you think he was fretting? Or worrying over his churches as he paced his prison battlements by the blue sea? We may be absolutely certain he was doing nothing like that—he was growing and ripening in his own inward life. For twenty years he had been fighting for Christ, amid the excitement and stress of a glorious campaign. New views of Christ had been borne upon his heart; new aspects of the Gospel had arrested him. It wanted leisure now to focus everything, and God bestowed that leisure at Cæsarea. Compare the letters that were written *after* these years, with the letters which we know were written before them. Note the richness and depth and glory of the later ones, their exaltation of the Lord Jesus Christ; their fresh insistence upon spiritual union; their recognition of the possibilities of sainthood; their method of bringing the most majestic doctrines to bear on the common duties of every day—and you will see what these two years did for Paul. I dare say the soldiers thought him very idle. Had you asked them, they would have said he was doing nothing. Yet all Christendom is deeply in God's debt, for making Paul come apart, and rest awhile.

ONLY one incident has been enshrined for us, out of these two years at Cæsarea. It is the scene with which our passage opens, when Paul was brought before Felix and Drusilla. Drusilla was the youngest daughter of King Herod Agrippa I. She was a beautiful young Jewess of some eighteen years of age. But there were dark shadows lying across her path that would have marred the fairest womanhood. It was not God who had made her Felix's wife. She had a home already when Felix cast his bad eyes on her. And it may be that a guilty conscience, and a torn heart, and a mind that could not forget, urged her to hear the Gospel of this prisoner. Do you observe what Paul was asked to speak

about? He was asked to speak 'concerning the faith in Christ.' And do you note what Paul *did* speak about? He reasoned of righteousness and self-control and judgment. Righteousness—and Felix was a promise-breaker, and had procured the murder of the High-priest Jonathan. Self-control—and there at his side, eagerly listening, sat beautiful Drusilla. Judgment—that was the very thought that haunted Felix, only it was the judgment of his emperor, not of his God. No wonder Felix trembled. He had the soul of a slave, says Tacitus, and the power of a sovereign. He would hear no more; Paul was dismissed; 'when I have a convenient (not *more* convenient) season, I will call for thee.'

ABOUT the year 60, Felix was recalled, and was succeeded in the governorship by Porcius Festus. Festus seems to have been a better ruler, and probably he was a better man, than Felix, but, like a Roman, he cared little for religion, and could not understand religious earnestness. He was perplexed about this Jewish prisoner; it occurred to him that he might try the case at Jerusalem; and it was then that Paul, apprehending the danger he was in, took the great step of appealing to Cæsar. That is not in the passage to be read; but it must be touched on to illuminate the passage. For it was not till Paul had appealed to Cæsar, that Agrippa and Bernice came to Cæsarea. Might not *they* be able to unravel Festus' difficulties? They were Jews, and understood the points at issue. Festus arranged that a court should be convened, at which Agrippa and Bernice might be present. It was then that Paul made that most noble defence which is recorded in the twenty-sixth chapter. He told the story of his conversion again, for his greatest defence of all just lay in that. And our passages take up the narrative at the point where Paul has touched on resurrection, and has been rudely silenced by Festus crying out in a loud voice, 'Paul, thou art mad!' Paul

instantly, and without losing self-command, repels the charge. He appeals to Agrippa on the grounds of Jewish prophecy. And Agrippa replies in these memorable words, 'Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian.' Do we know what Agrippa really meant? He did *not* mean 'I am almost persuaded.' The Greek words that have been translated so are not capable of bearing such a sense. What Agrippa meant was, 'Paul, do you think that with a little persuasion you are going to persuade *me* to be a Christian? It is a far harder task than you imagine.'

NOW let us note three simple lessons, and first *the peril of to-morrow*. Some one has said that to-day has two great enemies—the one is yesterday, the other is to-morrow. Are we not reminded of that whenever we think of Felix, whose evil past was such a burden on him, and who talked of a convenient time—which never came. Next mark *how history reverses human judgments*. Peter and the other disciples were despised, because they were ignorant and unlettered men. Paul was put to scorn by Festus for just the opposite reason—he had learned too much. Men thought the prophets of Israel raved. They said of Jesus that He was beside Himself. Is there any one *now* who would harbour such a thought? Lastly, see the *perfect courtesy of the apostle*—'I would you were altogether as I am except these bonds.' 'Courtesy,' says St. Francis of Assisi, 'is the sister of charity, which quencheth hate and keepeth love alive.' Never forget that God's mighty missionary was one of the truest gentlemen who ever breathed.

FIFTIETH SUNDAY

Morning

THE BURNING FIERY FURNACE

Passage to be read : Dan. iii. 1-30.

WHEN the foreign troubles of Nebuchadnezzar had been settled, and his hands were freed from the stern tasks of war, he turned his thoughts to the worship of the gods, who had prospered him (as he thought) in his campaigns. Erasmus, in one of his inimitable letters, narrates something he had witnessed during a storm at sea. He had seen a sailor on his knees while the storm raged, vowing a mighty wax candle to the Virgin. And when one charged the sailor with the madness of his vow (for all his savings would not purchase such a candle), the sailor bade the speaker hold his tongue, for if he got safe ashore the Virgin might look out for herself. Nebuchadnezzar was of a worthier manhood. His gods had prospered him, and he would honour them. And so we find him rebuilding their temples in Babylon, and reviving forgotten ordinances of worship, and setting up, in the honour of some deity, a great image of gold upon the plain. We must not think it was of *solid* gold. We shall find in Isaiah how the image was made (Isa. xlv. 9-20). Like idolatry itself, it glittered outwardly, but there was nothing real about its heart. Here, then, on the day of dedication, there gathered a vast multitude of people. Many a strange dress and stranger dialect was there, from the outlying provinces of Babylon.

And when the music sounded, and the cymbals clashed, and the morning sunlight glanced on the golden figure, the vast crowd flung themselves prostrate and worshipped the image that the king had made.

NOW one would have thought that in such a crowd as that the absence of three men would have been undetected. But jealousy (like love) has piercing eyes. When Mary of Lorraine was regent in Scotland, most of the high offices of state were held by Frenchmen; and we know from history how bitter was the feeling that aliens should be favoured in that way. No doubt it was the same in Babylon. The natives were angry at these brilliant strangers. They fretted under the sway of foreign governors, and would lose no chance to secure their overthrow. And now the opportunity had come; Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were absent; and the doom of the fiery furnace had been pronounced on any man who dared absent himself. Tidings were swiftly carried to the king. The exiles were brought into the royal presence. And there, with a heroism that the world would call reckless, they avowed their intention of holding fast to God. It was a new thing for an Oriental monarch to be bearded by his prisoners like that. He fell into a paroxysm of fury—the passions of a despot are ungovernable. The heat of the furnace was increased sevenfold, and the three Jews were marched out to their doom.

BUT man's extremity is God's opportunity. When everything is darkest, God is highest. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were faithful unto death, and unexpectedly they gained a crown of life. I fancy that among the swaying thousands there was a grim satisfaction at the scene. I do not think that many eyes were pitiful, as the three prisoners moved towards their death. There have been martyrs who were cheered in the last

hour by the prayer and the love of many in the crowd ; but in all that multitude upon the plain of Dura, I doubt if there was one sympathetic heart. But Shadrach and Meshach and Abednego had *God*. They had a very present help in time of trouble. They did not dream, when the blast of the furnace met them, how gloriously God was going to work. They reach the fire ; they are cast into it. The flames leap out and scorch their guards to death. And Nebuchadnezzar in his chair of state (like Cardinal Beaton in his window at St. Andrews) looks out to the furnace-bars to see the end. Have his eyes tricked him? Is his brain reeling? Had the soldiers added Daniel to the three? There goes a thrill of excitement through the crowd as the king starts, and grasps the winged lions of his chair. We know now that it was not Daniel whom he saw. It was one fairer than Daniel, for all his pulse and water. It was a figure, human yet divinely beautiful ; not wrinkled with age, but with the dew of youth on it—it was something like *that* that a Babylonian would mean, when he spoke of having seen a son of God. *We* mean a great deal more than that ; but I do not think we mean too much. For the presence of the eternal Son was with His own, and He is fairer than the sons of men. And so the passage closes with the rescue, and with the restoration of the three to their high posts. And as the crowds went homeward to their villages, over the hills, and down the flower-clad valleys, there would lie a strange sense on many hearts of a Power greater than the golden image.

THESE three lessons meet us in the chapter : (1) *Religion will keep us out of certain crowds*. There were powerful inducements for the three Jews to be present, on the day of the dedication of the image. Curiosity alone would have moved them to be there, and there were weighty reasons for it apart from that. But they deliberately stayed away from the assembly, and they did

so on religious grounds. Are there no gatherings and companies *you* would avoid, if you were as loyal to God as these three were? (2) *God does nothing by halves.* The writer tells how fully they were saved. They were not saved as by fire. Not a hair of their head was singed; there was no smell of fire about them; not a spark lay smouldering in their woollen tunics. It is a mark of the handiwork of God that He does far above what we can ask or think. (3) *The furnace reveals the ever-present Lord.* The Redeemer was never absent from His children—they were shepherded night and day by the love of heaven. But as it takes the night-time to reveal the stars, so it took the furnace to reveal the Lord. It was in the fire that He became visible.

FIFTIETH SUNDAY

Evening

PAUL'S VOYAGE AND SHIPWRECK

Passage to be read : Acts xxvii. 9-44.

ALL of us love stories of voyages and shipwrecks, and our lesson of to-day deals with these themes. I do not know any chapter in the Bible that is more alive with thrilling interest. So far, we have seen Paul in many perils; we have followed him through many strange adventures; but just as the hero in the schoolboys' story-books is never quite perfect till he has suffered shipwreck, so is it with this traveller and missionary. Can we briefly outline the fascinating story? Well, Paul embarked at Cæsarea, under the guard of a centurion, Julius. The vessel was only a coasting-vessel; they would have to change if they were to get to Rome. Fortunately, at Myra, in Asia Minor,

a corn-ship from Alexandria was in the harbour. It was bound for Rome, to distribute its cargo there, and Julius and his prisoners got a passage. But the season was late, and the winds were getting stormy; it was with great difficulty that they made a port in Crete. Here they would have remained throughout the winter, had they hearkened to the advice of Paul. But who was Paul that he should be attended to? Had not the captain made this voyage twenty times? The prospect of wintering in Crete was quite intolerable, when the stir and gaiety of Rome were waiting them. So the harbour was left, the sails were trimmed again, a favouring breeze gave every one new heart; when suddenly the ship was caught in a typhoon—one of the wild and dangerous storms of the Mediterranean. The boat was hoisted on board, the sails were furled; stout ropes were passed round the body of the ship; not a glimpse of the sun could be got, not a star was visible;—for fourteen days they drove on under bare masts. Then at midnight there arose the cry of ‘Land!’ Soundings were taken, the water was getting shallower. Four anchors were cast out of the stern; they held, and the ship rode safely till the morning. Then as the light dawned, and outlines became visible, a little bay among the cliffs was seen. The cables were cut, and a desperate effort was made to beach the vessel on the rock-engirdled sand. It partly failed, the currents were so strong. The ship was driven ashore and sorely battered. But though she soon went to pieces, and everything was lost, ‘it came to pass that they escaped all safe to land.’

NOW among the many lessons of this chapter, note, first, *that the hour reveals the man*. When Paul stepped on board, he was one of a batch of prisoners. Neither captain or sailors would give two thoughts to him. They had carried all manner of desperadoes Romeward, and there was nothing striking about this

little Jew. But gradually, as the voyage became more perilous, Paul moved out from the darkness to the light. It was he who advised and encouraged and commanded. It was he who put new heart and hope in everybody. He went on board an unregarded prisoner, but the hour of need struck, and he stood supreme. Do not such hours come to all of us, when for weal or woe we stand in our true colours? 'There is nothing hid, but shall be revealed.' It was Paul's years of reliance upon God, and of secret prayer, and of steadfast loyalty, that broke into the rich blossom of this hour. Will there be such secrets to reveal in us?

NEXT note *how faith in God keeps a man calm.*

Perhaps that is the most notable feature in this story. Amid a scene of excitement and of terror, we are arrested by the quietude of Paul. The sailors, panic-stricken, were for fleeing; the soldiers were crying out to kill the prisoners; but the apostle was cool, collected, confident, and he was so, because of his faith in God. Men used to feel that, too, about General Gordon. There was something mysterious in his calmness in moments of peril. Those who had fought in many a desperate battle, and witnessed many shining deeds of heroism, would say there was something in the courage of Gordon that was unlike anything they had ever seen. We know now what that 'something' was. It was living and glowing and conquering trust in God. It was the same faith as gave Paul the quiet mastery, in the confusion and panic of the storm.

A GAIN, we must not omit to notice here, *that many may be saved for one man's sake.* When the ship was driving westward before the wind, an angel of God, we read, appeared to Paul. And the message which the angel brought was this: 'Fear not, Paul, thou must be brought before Cæsar; and lo, God hath given thee all

them that sail with thee'—that means that for the apostle's sake, every man on board the vessel would be saved. How little any of them ever dreamed of their obligation to this despised Jew! In after days, when the sailors told the story of the wreck, they would say it was a miracle they were not lost. But the only miracle was the will of God, in choosing their vessel for His servant's journey. And we are like these sailors in this one respect. We all owe debts where we little dream of it. A father's example, and a mother's prayer, the presence of good men and women in our childhood, the spirit of Jesus breathing in the world and falling on us like the blowing of the wind, these influences mould us when we never know of it, and may save us in our hours of gale and storm.

THEN, lastly, it is not enough to wish for the day (v. 29); *there are some anchors that we all should cast.* One of them is *faith*; another is *a good conscience.* Without these, says Paul, some have made shipwreck (1 Tim. i. 19). A third is *hope*: 'which hope we have as an anchor of the soul' (Heb. vi. 19). We are all voyaging on a dark and boisterous sea. Our hearts and our eyes should ever be towards the morning. Meantime let us thank God that we have anchors by which the weakest may ride out the night.

FIFTY-FIRST SUNDAY

Morning

JONAH'S FLIGHT

Passage to be read : Jonah i. 1-17.

A PART from the narrative of these four chapters, we know little about the prophet Jonah. His name means *dove*, and is therefore the same name as that borne by another famous missionary, Columba. Columba, too, set out on a long voyage, and had some wild experiences on the deep, but Columba was obeying, not refusing, the call of God. Jonah was the son of Amittai, and was born in the Galilean village of Gath-hepher. Gath-hepher lay a mile or two from Nazareth, and the tomb of Jonah is still shown there. Can we not picture the divine boy at Nazareth rambling among the flowers over to Jonah's village, and listening with boyish eagerness to this story? We get one glimpse of Jonah in the Book of Kings. He is sent to King Jeroboam the Second with the glad news of coming victories. Twice over our Lord refers to Jonah—can we find the two places in the Gospel? Note, too, that the Jews had a favourite legend which represented Jonah as the son of the widow of Sarepta, and as the youth whom Elisha sent to anoint Jehu king of Israel.

IN this little book, then, Jonah is the central figure, and the first chapter gives the story of his flight. God called him *eastward* to preach to wicked Nineveh, and when the drama begins he is flying to the *west*. Was he

afraid of the long journey eastward? Had his heart sunk under his dark commission? We must learn that the very opposite is true—it was the thought of the *mercy* of God that made him fly. Jonah was no coward, and Jonah was a Jew. He looked with the scorn of a Jew on heathen Nineveh. He would have blown the trumpet against Nineveh bravely, if the trumpet were to be followed by the doom. But, somehow, there had stolen into his heart the thought that Jehovah was going to be merciful to Nineveh; somehow it had gleamed on his narrow soul that the love of God was to be wider than he knew; and to the spirit of Israel, typified in Jonah, such outflowing of mercy beyond covenant-barriers was intolerable, and Jonah fled from the presence of the Lord. It was a strange thing that Jonah should fly from God because God was going to be kind to sinners; but Jonah is not the first and not the last who has had a quarrel with heaven on that score. So Jonah embarks on the ship bound for Tartessus—that emporium of the Phœnician adventurers in Spain. Then comes the storm, sweeping down from the hills where Jonah thought he had said farewell to God. And how Jonah slept in the uproar of the storm (do we remember Another who slept at sea?), and how the lot was cast and fell on Jonah; and how finally he was thrown overboard, and saved; all that we have known by heart since our mother's knee.

NOW note these three main lessons in the chapter; and first, *it is idle to try to fly from God*. Observe that Jonah did not fly by *land*; Jonah's first thought was to escape by *sea*. It shows how desperately in earnest he was, when he went down to Joppa and took ship. For the Jew did not think of the sea as we think now. It had no romance or poetry for the Jew. It was the barrier between the known and the unknown; it was the type of the chaos and tumult of the nations; to the *Greek* the sea was as a laughing child, to the *Jew* the sea was a devour-

ing dragon. There is to be no more separation from the best in heaven, and therefore in John's vision there is *no more sea*; but Jonah was eager to escape the Best, and the way of escape he sought was through the waves. The story tells us how useless it all was. The hand of Jehovah touched him on the deep. He thought to hedge himself about from God, and he found that the way of God was in the waters. Have you ever tried to hide yourself from God? I do not mean by running off to sea. But have you ever tried to hide yourself from God by excuses? or company? or lies? or noisy laughter? I want you to enter the week with this great lesson from Jonah: it is always idle to try to fly from God.

NEXT note how *the disobedience of one brings many into danger*. No doubt when Jonah went aboard the barque, he was very grateful for the vessel's shelter. The sailors were heathen and Jonah dare not love them; but he would not for worlds that any harm should come to them. They were playing a very kindly part towards him, in taking him as a passenger from God. But Jonah was secretly disobeying God, and the storm swept from the hills upon the vessel; and the eastern wares had to be jettisoned; and the sails were tattered and the masts went by the board; and the Phœnician crew (men like our Elizabethan sailors, the finest seamen in the world) thought their last hour had come. It was Jonah's disobedience which wrought it all. It fell like a curse upon the innocent. And though God may not work in such immediate ways now, nor show His anger in billow or in storm, we must be sure that the calls which *we* reject will come like an evil upon all our shipmates. No mother can be false to motherhood but that fine vessel christened '*Home*' will suffer. No father can reject the calls of fatherhood and expect a happy voyage for those he loves. If any boy refuses to be true, others will suffer for it as well as he. If any girl refuses to be kind, there will be

less sunshine in some other lives. The God of Jonah calls every one of us; and the sea becomes wild for *others* when we disobey.

LASTLY, this is a great lesson of the chapter: *the hour comes when character is known*. Standing on the busy wharf at Joppa, Jonah and the crew were strangers to each other. He was a queer passenger, no doubt; but they had seen a deal of queer folk in their voyaging. And *they* were heathen; and Jonah, like a true Jew, was far too scornful to be curious about *them*. But when the storm came, there were strange revelations. Jonah stood forth in his true colours then. And, stranger still, these hardened Phœnician rovers displayed a depth of kindness towards their passenger that no one in Joppa would have given them credit for. The hour came when they understood each other. God led them, so that their character was seen. And every one of us may rest assured that God is leading *us* by such a path, that sooner or later the dark things will be known.

FIFTY-FIRST SUNDAY

Evening

KINDNESS AT MELITA

Passage to be read: Acts xxviii. 1-15.

WHEN at last the shipwrecked company reached shore, they learned that the island on which they were cast was Melita. There can be no reasonable doubt that Melita was the island known to us as Malta. Malta to-day is one of our own possessions, and though small it is of the highest importance. It is the principal coaling-station in the Mediterranean; it is the headquarters of the Mediterranean fleet; and its forti-

fications are extraordinarily strong. It is one of the most thickly populated islands in the world now, and the natives love it—they call it ‘the flower of the world’; and in springtime at least, when it is carpeted with blossom, one would not readily quarrel with the name. Do the boys know what a Maltese cross is like? And have they ever heard of the Knights of Malta? These names remind us of the part that Malta played in the inspiring and yet tragic story of the Crusades. It was on this island, then, that Paul was cast, and found himself in the midst of a barbarous people. Now we must not think from that word *barbarous* that the Maltese were wild and dangerous savages. A barbarian was just a man whose speech was like bar—bar—bar—there was no sense in it to a Greek or Latin. To-day the natives speak a corrupt Arabic, with a strong flavour of Italian in it. But perhaps in Paul’s time it would be a debased Phœnician dialect, and that would just be bar—bar—bar to the apostle.

NOW the first thing to impress me in this story is *how thoroughly God fulfils His promises*. His care did not cease nor His lovingkindness vanish, when the peril of the breakers was removed. You remember what God had whispered in the storm? He had promised to give to Paul the lives of all on board (xxvii. 24). And in the strict sense that promise was fulfilled when the whole company got safe to land. But what if the island had been a desert island? Or what if the natives had attacked the crew? The rescue from the wild surf in St. Paul’s Bay would have been of little service if it had led to that. It is when I read of the kindness of the islanders, and of their hospitable welcome to the shipwrecked, that I see what a large and liberal interpretation we should always give to God’s promise of protection. When Jesus had passed through the storm of His temptation, angels came and ministered unto Him. It

was a desert place, the haunt of ravening beasts, yet even there God had His angels ready. So here when the peril of the sea was over, there are ministering hearts and hands upon the shore. It is always wise to take the words of God, not at their lowest but at their highest value. We need never hesitate to pour a wealth of meaning into the simplest and briefest of His pledges. As Paul looked back on this exciting voyage, and traced the action of God's hand in it, he must have felt that God had done for him far above what he could ask or think.

ONCE more this lesson admirably illustrates the proverb that *it's an ill wind that blows nobody good*. This was an ill wind for the Alexandrian corn-ship. I dare say it almost broke the heart of the good captain. He had carried so many cargoes safe to Rome that this sudden calamity was overwhelming. Sailors are often very superstitious, and they were invariably so in the old world. They never dreamed of starting on a voyage without offering sacrifices and taking auspices. What was the meaning, then, of this ill-wind? Were the gods offended, or were they simply mocking? I think we see now that the furious gale was blowing a blessing upon heathen Malta. There would be much corn washed up on the shore. The beach would be covered with the grain from Africa. But it was not food like *that* that was the storm's best gift for the islanders who knew not God. It was the message of Christ that the apostle preached to them; it was the prayers which were offered in the name of Jesus; it was the healing of the sick and the diseased. There was not a sailor but muttered, 'What an ill wind is this'; yet it was blowing untold good to Malta. Can we recall, from the Bible or from history, any other great storms that blew a blessing anywhere? There are two that will suggest themselves at once. One was the tempest on the Lake of Galilee that so

enriched the disciples in their knowledge of Christ. The other was the storm which fell on the Armada, and drove it asunder, and dashed it on wild rocks—an ill wind, but a wind which saved our country, and wrought incalculable good for Europe.

AGAIN, our lesson shows us this, that *even a viper may help on the Gospel*. We all know the story of the viper. It is one of the Bible scenes we never forget. We see the creature torpid in the brushwood; we watch it stirring as the heat of the fire gets at it; and then—irritated—it grips the apostle's hand, and is shaken off into the fire. You see that if Paul had let *others* tend the fire, he would have escaped this sudden peril. But it is always nobler to run the risk of vipers, than to sit idle and let others do the work. And then what happened? Every eye was fixed on Paul. He came to his own rightful place at once. They thought that he was a murderer; then that he was a god. The captain and mate and crew took a second place. Paul would be spoken of that night in a hundred cottages, and before morning Publius would know of him. The viper was the bell before the sermon. It stirred up interest and centred it on Paul. He would not have to wait for an audience now when he began (through an interpreter) to preach. Note then that even poisonous creatures may be used to advance the message of Christ Jesus. It is a great thing to believe that we serve a Lord who can turn even a snake into an argument. No man ever gave himself up to what was highest without stirring up the venom in the firewood; but as the world looks back upon these noble lives, it sees that all things were working for their good.

THEN lastly, the great lesson of these verses is *the sure reward that follows a kindly welcome*. We have all heard of the Cornish wreckers, and of the heart-

less cruelty that characterised them. A wreck was an act of God, not to be interfered with, and strange stories are told of how men were left to die. Such wreckers were true barbarians (though they called themselves Christians), and no blessing ever followed their vile gains. How different is this scene at Malta! The islanders gave the shipwrecked a kind welcome; they did it instinctively, looking for no reward. But when their fevered were cured and their diseased were healed, they found they had got far more than they gave. No generous welcome is ever thrown away. Kindnesses, not less than curses, come home to roost. Writ large, over all the passage, is the golden text, 'Be not forgetful to entertain strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares' (Heb. xiii. 2).

FIFTY-SECOND SUNDAY

Morning

JONAH AT NINEVEH

Passages to be read : Jonah iii. 1-10; iv. 1-11.

A SECOND time the command came to Jonah to go to the great city of Nineveh and cry against it. When the second call came, Jonah was a wiser man. He had learned how impossible it was to fly from God. The storm, and the falling of the lot on him, and the miraculous saving of his life thereafter, had taught him the folly of trying to disobey. On *this* occasion, then, Jonah arose. He set his face towards Assyria. And soon there rose up on the horizon the palaces and the towers and the walls of Nineveh; it was a city of unrivalled wealth and splendour. But it is not of the palaces we read here. Jonah 'entered into the city a day's journey.' We see him wandering through interminable streets, where human life is massed and dense and teeming; and always, down one street and up another, the same cry of doom is on his lips, 'Forty more days and Nineveh shall perish.' Repetition, says the Latin proverb, is the mother of studies. It is also the mother of powerful impressions. There was something haunting in the ceaseless cry of this alien prophet of the unknown God. Men woke at night with it ringing in their ears. Mothers stopped singing and shuddered when they heard it. It echoed from the cottage to the palace and touched the heart of the king upon the

throne. Doubtless the way had been prepared for Jonah. Conscience had been wakened in ways unknown to us. This voice was the outward and visible seal of a wrath that somehow had been recognised as imminent. It issued in immediate repentance. From king to cottager they turned from their evil way (v. 10), with all the Oriental trappings of heart-sorrow (v. 8). And God repented of the evil and He did it not (v. 10).

NOW it shows how far Jonah was from having a heavenly mind, that he was very angry at God's mercy. If there is joy in heaven over *one* sinner that repenteth, how exultant the joy must be when a vast city turns! And a vast city here *has* turned to God, and all the ranks and choirs of heaven are jubilant; yet Jonah, heaven's prophet, is intensely angry. It teaches us that a man may be called to preach, yet may often miss the spirit of his summons. Part of the anger of Jonah sprang from this, that the word he had uttered would not be fulfilled. He feared lest men should reckon him a lying prophet, because the cloud did not break in beating rain. But deeper still lay the irritating thought that the mercy of God should be lavished on the heathen (iv. 2). It was this squandering of covenanted kindness that angered the typical Jew like Jonah. So Jonah sulked while the angels in glory sang. He left the city and built his wattled booth, and sat there hoping against hope for judgment. And it was there God taught His foolish child a lesson that has made all Christendom indebted to his sulks. A gourd sprang up and sheltered the prophet's booth. It was very pleasant to brood in its cool shadow. But when the sun in its fiery splendour rose at the morrow's dawn, the gourd had shrivelled and the shade was gone. And then there blew a silent (v. 8, margin) but searching wind—how the broad leaves would have sheltered him from that! Yet I cannot help loving Jonah when I find that personal discomfort did not fill

all his heart. He had eyes for the swift tragedy of that poor herb. It perplexed him that it should flourish just to perish. It was inscrutable that it should be clothed with glory and come to nothingness all in a night. And it was then that God raised the eyes of His cross child to Nineveh, and said, 'Do you understand My pity *now*'? 'You did not labour for that herb—only a gourd!—yet when it perished were *you* not sorry for it? Think of *My* sorrow if My hand of judgment had had to slay the multitudes of Nineveh.' And there, abruptly, the book of Jonah closes. God's word leaves much to the imagination. But Jonah would never see a gourd again, or a mountain-blossom nipped by sudden frost, but he would remember that the love of God is broader than the measures of mankind.

THERE are three secondary lessons in these chapters; and first, *there is strong faith in unexpected places*. We know how slow the Jews were to believe. We know how prone they were to despise the prophets. And if *they* gave a cold welcome to God's speaker, how harsh a reception might we expect in Nineveh! Yet Nineveh listened to the voice of God; and the Syro-Phœnician would not be gainsaid; and it was of a pagan officer that Jesus said that He had not found such great faith, no, not in Israel. Sometimes it is in the unlikeliest of homes that we find the deepest and finest heart-religion. Sometimes it is the last boy in the family whom we had hopes for, who comes out and out on the side of Jesus Christ. We should never despair. We should never cease to watch. We should be hopeful in the most hopeless cases. When Jerusalem, with its Temple and altars is deaf, unlikely Nineveh may have an ear to hear.

NEXT, *no man is so angry as the man who is in the wrong*. That proverb is exemplified in Jonah. Can we give other instances from Scripture that confirm the

truth of that old saying? Well, when God accepted Abel and his sacrifice, remember how Cain was enraged, and wreaked his vengeance on Abel (Gen. iv. 2-8). And when God had rejected Saul from being king, and when Jonathan sought to protect David from Saul's designs, Saul hurled his javelin at Jonathan in wild fury (1 Sam. xx. 30-33). Recall, too, the wrath of Naaman at Elisha when all the time Elisha wished to heal him (2 Kings v. 11-12), and the anger of Herod when the wise men from the East did not return to him with news of Jesus (Matt. ii. 16).

LASTLY, *God is preparing when we know it not.* Has the reader noticed how the thought of preparation runs through the story of this little book? One of its features is that, behind all human acting, we see the hand of God preparing things. 'The Lord had *prepared* a great fish to swallow Jonah.' 'And the Lord *prepared* a gourd, and *prepared* a worm when the morning rose next day.' 'And it came to pass when the sun did arise, that the Lord *prepared* a vehement east wind.' That is a lesson we all need to learn. It is one secret of a strong and noble life. We are not merely to believe in the *purposes* of God; we are to believe in His *preparations* too. Am I called to work? God has prepared for that. Or am I called to suffer? He is preparing. There is not a day and not a deed ahead, but the love of my Father is making ready *now*. Our liberty is real, and we must cherish it. Our wills are free to choose. But over our freedom is the sovereign will, and the ceaseless preparations of His love.

FIFTY-SECOND SUNDAY

Evening

THE MESSAGE OF CHRISTMAS

Passage to be read : Luke ii. 8-20.

IT was a great thing for these shepherds to be in the same country with the new-born Christ. There were many other folk upon that countryside. There were the merchants of Bethlehem, and the shopkeepers. There were the Roman officers taking the census, and the Roman soldiers in their garrisons. But they never dreamed that the crisis of all history was being enacted at their very doors. The shepherds knew it, God had revealed it to them; out on the hill-pasture under the stars they learned it. And it was a great and glorious thing for them to be in the country of the new-born Christ. I trust it will prove so to all who read this page. For not in a manger and not in swaddling-clothes, but in all revivals and in all fightings for the right, Jesus is mystically born again. And to be wakened to the new life, and catch the meaning of it, is to join the company of these simple shepherds. Do not be self-centred any more. Find out what God is doing in your neighbourhood. And in a wider horizon and a glowing heart, and a song from above like the music of the angels, it will be a great thing for you, as for the shepherds, to be in the country of a new-born Christ.

NOTE first, then, that *God's greatest news is revealed to humble men*. There were many great men and many wealthy men in Palestine. There were scholars of the most profound and various learning. There were lean ascetics who had left the joys of home, and gone

away to pray and fast in deserts. But it was not to any of these that the angels came, and it was not in their ears the music sounded; the greatest news that the world ever heard was given to a group of humble shepherds. Few sounds from the mighty world ever disturbed them. They were not vexed by any ambition to be famous. They passed their days amid the silence of nature, and to the Jew nature was the veil of God. They were men of a devout and reverent spirit, touched with a sense of the mystery of things, as shepherds are so often to this day. Is it not to such simple and reverent spirits that God still reveals Himself in amplest measure? Must we not become as little children if we would know the secrets of the Kingdom? Whenever I read the beatitude of Jesus, 'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven,' I see the shepherds chatting on the hill. How fitting it was, too, that shepherds should be chosen, when we remember how the twenty-third psalm begins, and when we reflect that the babe born in Bethlehem was to be the good shepherd giving His life for the sheep.

AGAIN, note that *when the glory reached them the shepherds were with their flocks*. I like to think that when the heavens shone, and the air thrilled with that magnificent music, these humble men were at their humble duty. I dare say that on the highway over the hill there were fast young fellows going rioting home. Do you think *they* caught one whisper of that heavenly chorus? I dare say one shepherd had turned lazy, and was asleep at home when he should have been at his herding. Do you imagine *he* had any vision of the angels? It was to the shepherds who were at their posts, and who were toiling faithfully at their appointed work, that God revealed the birth of Jesus Christ. Could there be any better Christmas message than that? There is an open heaven above simple duty. It is not through the page-

antry of idle dreams that life becomes a great and noble thing. It is through the fine heroism that sweeps moods aside, and takes up the cross, and grapples with daily work. It is on simple duty that the glory falls. It is the shepherds at their posts who see the angels.

TO the same purpose is this other lesson: *it is the manger that proves the music true.* This was a night of wonder for the shepherds. It is not remarkable that they were sore afraid. When the darkness of midnight flashed into glorious splendour, and the silence of midnight rang with an angel's voice, it is no marvel that the shepherds were dismayed. Was it a dream? Was it the work of magic? Would the splendour pass, and leave things as they were? 'This shall be a sign unto you, ye shall find the babe lying in a manger.' You note, then, what a mean and sorry thing was to be the proof that the vision was from God. No cradle enriched with ivory or gems; no palace flashing with a thousand lights. It was a lowly cave that confirmed the tidings. It was the manger that countersigned the music. What does that mean for your life and for mine? It means that we may put our visions to the proof. It means that God intends us to prove them true in spheres as lowly as the manger-cradle. No vision of love, if the love be truly God's, will pass away and leave us to our midnight. It will be verified in the round of humble toil, and in the drudgery of every common day.

LASTLY, *the angels depart, but Jesus Christ remains.* It would be a little while before the shepherds realised that the angels had actually gone. Then the darkness would be deepened a thousandfold. Yet it was not while the angels sung their hymn that the shepherds found the place where Christ was laid. It was in the moment of the angels' going that they rose up and made for Bethlehem. And is it not often when the angel

departs (and the angel may be a child or sister) that the heart for the first time sets out for Christ? The angels went, but Jesus Christ remained. The music ceased, but the Lord was with them still. They would never hear again these heavenly strains, but the Saviour was never far away. It is in that faith we all must live and work. The angel and the vision and the music go. The dreams and the hopes of our childhood may depart, and we may seem to be left under a cheerless sky. But though the glory fade, Christ Jesus still remains. He is always with us to hearten and cheer and keep us. Better than any song of angels in His fellowship. It is the true secret of a happy Christmas.

Printed by T. and A. CONSTABLE, Printers to His Majesty
at the Edinburgh University Press

Printed in Great Britain



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